

JANUARY 1983

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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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by Brett Halliday

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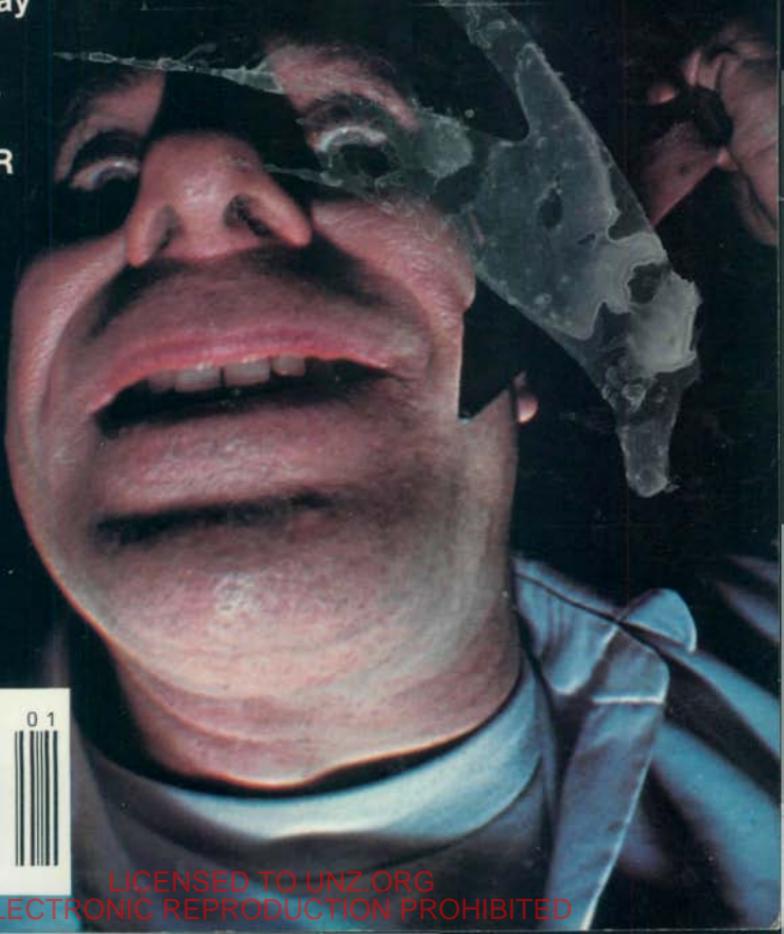
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1983



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THE RETURN OF THE BEACH BUTCHER

by Brett Halliday

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After an absence of over twenty years bodies were again showing up on the crystal sands of Miami Beach with unique daggers in their throats. The newspapers, city government and the police weren't saying anything. But they were all thinking the same thing Mike Shayne was . . . the Beach Butcher was back! . . . 4

NOVELETS

THE HAPPY NEW YEAR MURDERS

Mel D. Ames 42

TERROR KEY

Mike Taylor 64

SHORT STORIES

THE LIGHTS ACROSS THE LAKE

Patrick Scaffetti 82

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

James M. Reasoner 96

VENDETTA

Jay Fox 104

THE FEATHERSTON WHISPERER

Wade Mosby 114

LET THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME

Douglas Hiller 119

FEATURES

STIFF COMPETITION (Book Reviews)

John Ball 125

MIKE'S MAIL (Letter from Readers)

..... 128

It was happening again, after thirty years — the ritual killing with leather and dagger. The Beach Butcher was back, as deadly efficient as ever, and Mike Shayne had to stop him — or die trying!

The Return of the Beach Butcher

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE ROLLED OVER IN THE LATE-SUMMER SUN. The early morning beach was covered more with seaweed and other flotsam than with people. His trained eye caught an elderly couple walking hand in hand through the cool, damp sand and a seabird bringing a newly found treasure to its mate. A Sunday morning like this one made the big redhead very much aware of the primal tug of the ocean, its power to draw life to it and to revitalize.

Drawing a deep breath of salt-scented air, he stretched his lean, sinewy body. How far out in the surf had he just swum? No matter. It had left him thoroughly refreshed and alive. Moments like this, he decided, put you back in touch with essential things.

"Didn't I tell you a Sunday morning off would do you a world of good?" Lucy Hamilton said, reading his mind on the beach as well as in his office.

The rawboned redhead smiled as her gentle fingers probed his muscles, seeking out and massaging away the pockets of pain.

"Yeah," he admitted, "the sand and sun sure beat the cut-throat morals and the brutality of the street. When you're in my kind of business, the world steals a little piece of you every day. Times like this rejuvenate the soul."

Lucy's hands paused on his chest. "Michael..." she said hesitantly, "have you . . . ever thought of . . . well, getting out of this dirty business."

"Every day," he admitted with his customary honesty. "I'm no different from anybody else in that respect, Angel. My job gets to me, and sometimes I just want to throw up my hands and walk away."

"Then why don't you?"

The redhead sat up and unconsciously tugged on his left earlobe. How ironic that his beautiful secretary and companion had voiced a question that with each broken skull, each whiff of cordite became more difficult to answer, so he punched a button, "Somebody has to do it, I guess."

"But why you?"

Shayne rasped his fingernail across his chin. How could you tell somebody something you weren't sure of yourself? For a moment he lost himself as the beating of his heart and the surf pounding the shore became one.

A seagull screeched in his ear and that was followed by an even louder shriek, a shriek with which the investigator was all too familiar.

HIS HEAD INVOLUNTARILY JERKED TO THE RIGHT. ABOUT A hundred feet up the beach he saw a blonde in her twenties staring in horror as two hulks in jeans and tight-fitting white t-shirts pummelled a suntanned figure.

"Please!" the girl cried out, her hands waving frantically. "Somebody help."

More moth than man, Shayne felt himself drawn to the flame of violence. As he sped toward the fight, his legs kicking up piles of sand, the picture of Lucy's face the moment he had risen from the blanket flashed before him. It was one filled with reluctant acceptance and framed in fear — yes, fear even after all the years.

"They're going to kill him," the blonde was shouting as she latched on to the tall redhead. "You've got to do something."

With his powerful hands, Shayne grabbed one assailant's shoulders and yanked. The t-shirted figure sprawled backward into the sand while the detective turned toward the other. Like a pulling guard, Shayne merely lowered his shoulder and rammed it into the man's midsection. With a whoosh he dropped.

Shayne stood over the fallen victim in a protective stance. "O.K., meatheads, you've kicked enough sand. If you're still in the mood for more, try me for size." A surge of adrenalin smacked into the redhead and his body tensed.

The two musclemen pulled themselves to their feet and knocked the wet sand from their jeans. "Who appointed *you* lifeguard?" snarled

the larger, his words coming between spits of sand.

Watching while the pale blonde knelt down over the figure beneath him, Shayne said, "Somebody has to keep this place clean of litter. Why don't you two beat it before the property value of my favorite beach drops any more."

The two men stared into Shayne's steely, purposeful eyes, and surprisingly they turned and walked toward the road. The redhead had expected more. He went over to the prostrate figure whose face was already swollen. Blood leaked from his nose and mouth.

"Thanks," said the blonde. "I thought . . ."

Shayne heard the footsteps behind him. He half-turned as the charging figure buried his shoulder in Shayne's side and drove the redhead down into the moist sand. Shayne felt a blow to his back and then another. They were kicking him with steel-toed shoes.

His back exploding in pain and his mind having trouble working, Shayne reacted by rolling toward the surf. A foot sliced through where his head had just been. Instinct told him his best bet was to get to the water. He kept rolling and suddenly came out of it in a crouch. They were almost on top of him as the surf foamed angrily around them.

One of the men's feet caught in the wet sand. Shayne came out of his crouch in a single motion, his right hand pumping upward. He felt a jaw crush and heard a yelp of pain. The other stood in the stance of a professional boxer. Well, the redhead had had a little ring experience; himself, enough to tell him not to come head in. He feinted with his right and then dove into the man's lead knee. He heard a pop and then an obscenity.

His opponent was out of the fight, but the days of saying "Uncle" were long behind the redhead. Locking his fists together, he hammered the muscleman in the bridge of his nose. Another crunch as it broke.

Shayne turned to greet the remaining figure, who came running right at him. Like a matador the redhead jumped to the side. As his opponent flew by, Shayne chopped at his neck.

The man went part way down, but recovered quickly. He stepped under the redhead's followup right and drove a vicious elbow into the detective's kidney. The redhead grimaced as the value of Lucy's massage was wiped out.

Shayne wheeled around quickly, his mind oblivious to the pain. His roundhouse right caught his opponent squarely in the chin, lifting him up in the air. As he came to rest in the loose sand, Shayne moved in for the kill.

Just then Lucy's voice called out. "That's enough, Michael. We've

got to get this young man to the hospital."

SHAYNE TROTTED HIS PAINFUL BODY UP THE BEACH TO THE trio. Lucy was right, of course. A man's life was more important than unfinished business. He picked up the figure and headed across the beach to his Buick. The hot sun felt good on his back. In the distance he could see the two men dragging themselves off the beach.

"Thanks," said the blonde as the redhead put the limp figure in the Buick's back seat. "Those two would have killed Doug."

Shayne's detective instincts took over. "Do you have any idea why they attacked him?"

"No. We were just walking on the beach. Those two came up behind us." Suddenly her tone changed. "I really don't want to talk. I mean I'm grateful, but Doug needs medical attention immediately."

Shayne wheeled the big car into the traffic. Miami Mercy was only a few minutes away. He glanced in the rear-vision mirror at the blood-splattered face and then at Lucy. They'd make it to the hospital in time — that wasn't what bothered him.

Maybe it was the partial answer he had given her to the question she'd asked earlier on the beach. He could no more turn his back on trouble than the tide could fail to come in.

SHAYNE SHIFTED HIS WEIGHT IN THE CREAKY SWIVEL CHAIR that was older than he was. His back still throbbed from where the beach musclemen had caught him a few days ago. He lit up another butt, then threw down the legal form he was reading. The language his lawyer, Matt Murdock, used in drawing up his standard contracts got fancier every year. *Per stirpes . . . party of the first part.* Hell, why couldn't attorneys just say what they meant in plain English?

The redhead stubbed his barely-used cigarette out in the full seashell that doubled for an ashtray and got up. He glanced out the window of his Flagler St. office at the busy traffic below. Did each one of those drivers, he wondered, have a specific destination in mind, a well-thought out reason for going there?

He crossed to the water cooler and yanked out a paper cup. The bubbles rising up in the spring water reminded him of his churning stomach. The lanky detective went to his files without thinking about it. From the second drawer of his cabinet, he pulled out a bottle of Martell, then put it back. The cognac wasn't going to change the taste in his mouth.

He didn't even hear the knock as the door into his office marked PRIVATE was suddenly thrust open and in popped his brown-haired

secretary. "Michael, there's a Sarah Stonecastle out here who desperately wants to see you. I hate to barge in, but . . ."

Shayne ruminaged through his murky mind, but found no file, no face with that name. His secretary read the puzzlement on his face and more.

"Tonight why don't we . . ." she started and then thought better of it. "I'll show her in," she said, changing the subject. "I think you'll remember her."

Lucy motioned and in walked a young woman in a white linen suit. Her blonde hair was tied up in a bun, and she was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, but Shayne still recognized her from the beach Sunday.

"I didn't know what to do, where to turn, Mr. Shayne."

"It's Mike," he said gently, offering her the chair in front of his desk. Suddenly he was embarrassed by the coat of dust he'd let form on it.

Professional to a fault, Lucy shut the door on them. Shayne studied the young girl's face. She was beautiful, but her crying had caused her makeup to run all over her cheeks.

"You were there once," she sobbed. "I hope" Before she could finish, she was overcome by tears.

"Sarah," he said, sitting on the desk in front of her and feeling very different from the moment before she had entered, "I'd be glad to help again, if I can."

SLOWLY SHE COMPOSED HERSELF, WIPING THE MAKEUP OFF and straightening her jacket. "It's about Doug." She coughed and raised her eyes to him. They were a filmy blue. "I suppose you saw it in the papers."

Shayne hated to admit that he had been so personally preoccupied that the week's *Miami Daily News* were collecting dust on the window ledge behind Lucy. "Refresh me," he said.

"Monday night Doug and I were supposed to have dinner at the Fontainebleau, but at the last minute he had to work late at the office."

"What does Doug do?" Shayne asked.

"He's a lawyer. Morden and Crutcher. He and Tommy Crutcher just started up a practice across the Causeway."

"What happened to him?" the detective said, sensing her answer.

"Tuesday morning the cleanup crew found him lying on the beach."

Shayne didn't have to ask about his condition.

"Very near where you helped him Sunday," she continued. Then, without warning she broke into tears and then a prolonged wail.

Shayne had no problem admitting his beautiful secretary was better at some things than he was, so he called her in. Within minutes Lucy had comforted the sobbing blonde and helped her regain the lost composure.

"Sarah, why come to me? I'm sure the police are working on it. Will Gentry's a fine . . . "

"Lt. Gentry was very polite, but the more he told me about the number of homicides, the cutbacks in his department, the city's refusal to pay overtime . . . the more I felt Doug was just another 'case,' a case being buried under all that paperwork on his desk."

"Will's not like that," Shayne said, admitting to himself that it sounded like his friend had given the girl an uncustomary runaround.

I can remember so clearly the night we met. It was at a party Daddy threw for Doug's father. They'd just completed one of their projects. Doug was so shy at first."

All of a sudden she shot up like a frail, white lily. "Mr. Shayne, I've got to know who killed Doug and why. Can you understand that?"

Like two and two make four. Maybe he'd been a little too wrapped up in himself to feel for others lately, but by damn this one interested him, interested him bad. Sure it sounded routine, even for a murder, but how difficult could it be to drop into the cop shop and check things out?

"Why don't you let Lucy get you a cab, Sarah." He took her hand and led her to the door. "I'm not doing anything that can't wait. I'll go see Gentry right away. O.K.?" He smiled at her.

Weakly she smiled back.

GENTRY WAVED HIS GIANT BLACK STOGIE, WHICH UP CLOSE looked to Shayne more like a baseball bat. For the first time in years the redhead thought about giving up smoking.

"Haven't had a good cigar since Castro captured Cuba," complained the cop.

"You really ought to get out of your office, Will. You can buy anything you want down on the street." Shayne settled in his friend's chair.

"Take a look at that desk."

Shayne looked at the piles of paper in front of him. "Give me a hint — where is it?"

"See those folders. Each one represents a homicide."

Shayne rummaged through the manila graveyard, peering mostly at the files on the bottom.

"What are you digging for?" Gentry coughed as the smoke was too

much for even him. "Maybe I ought to go back to those cancer sticks."

The redhead pulled out a coffee-stained report marked URGENT. "Morden, Douglas. White male. 26. Found Tuesday the 25th . . ."

Gentry snatched the folder from Shayne. "That's official police business. I can't let you look at it, unless," he grinned, "there's a bribe involved."

"A box of Havana's finest."

"Finest. Those putas will never clear immigration." Gentry alternated laughing and coughing at his unique sense of humor. Seriously, Mike, there's a lid on this one."

Shayne reached for the file. "Looks like a coffee can lid to me."

Gentry held back the manila folder and sat down in the chair reserved for suspects. "This is between you and me, Mike, and it's got to stay that way."

Shayne sensed the lawman's seriousness beneath the banter.

"If Morden were shot on Miami Avenue or hit in Little Havana and his pockets were empty, it wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. But he wasn't. He was found on the beach and he was killed . . . differently."

Gentry ground out the cigar on the cement floor and then continued. "I don't have to tell you how for the last year or so the tourist trade has dropped off drastically. Everybody from the big hotels to the sawdust restaurants has suffered. You and I know why, but the mayor and the city fathers had to commission a public relations firm to size up the situation. For a hundred thou they announced what we would have told anybody for a beer. Miami has a quote *image problem* — it's replaced Detroit as the Murder Capital of America. So what we don't need now is some Son of Sam, Zodiac, or Hillside Strangler."

Shayne sat up in the chair. "What are you getting at, Will?"

"Morden wasn't killed. He was executed — ritualistically."

"How? The mob?"

"No. It's not their style. Morden was found with a braided leather thong around his neck and a dagger in his heart. The throwing dagger had an onyx handle and a lightning bolt insignia set into it."

The redhead stood up. "Got any leads?"

"Not one. A total dead end."

"Thanks, Will." Shayne headed for the door.

"I mean it, Mike. If this gets out, it wouldn't take a plumber to find the source of the leak. And then it's goodbye pension, so long Bal Harbour home."

"I get the picture," Shayne said and shut the door.

SHAYNE PULLED THE BUICK OUT OF THE RESERVED POLICE slot. He had never seen Will so uptight. It wasn't just him, thought the redhead. Business seemed to be getting to everyone, or at least it sounded like a good theory. He knew someone he could check it out with.

Sitting at his customary table in The Beef House, Tim Rourke looked even thinner than usual.

"Flunk your tryout at the scarecrow camp," said the redhead as he sat down across from his friend. He waved off Pat's offer to fix him the usual.

"Nice to see you too, shamus."

"How's the job, Tim?"

"Never been better," he said, exhaling a mushroom cloud. "Miami's like the old *Naked City* TV series. You remember, there are eight million stories out there — wish I could write every one."

Scratch one theory, thought the detective.

"What brings you down here? Obviously you're not in the mood to belt down a few."

Shayne barely heard his friend's words. Rourke had a way of turning deadend streets into freeways with his enormous storehouse of information, but there was the promise to Gentry.

"You're big on styles, Tim," said Shayne, looking at the reporter's rumpled seersucker suit. "Are ritual murders making a comeback?"

"Around here they're deader than a Nehru jacket," Rourke finished his cigarette and lit another right away. "Sounds to me like you're going fishing. What's the matter, Mike? Can't you tell Uncle Tim about it, or are we dealing with" — he paused dramatically and lowered his voice — "the confidential relationship between a client and his detective?"

"Even bigger, newshound. The privileged information that passes between a snoopy shamus and a worried, loose-lipped cop."

Let's take this thing hypothetically. Just make up some sort of ritual murder for me."

Shayne paused. "What if a man were found on the beach with a braided leather noose around his neck and a throwing dagger in his heart. And suppose that dagger even had a lightning bolt on its handle."

Rourke swallowed hard. "So that's why the cops aren't talking about the Morden killing."

"Damn it, Tim. Does anything go on around this town that you don't know about?"

"Not as long as my sources come to me with hypothetical stories."

Rourke laughed and pulled his legs up beneath him.

"Tim, you're not going to print any of this?"

"Not as long as when hypothesis becomes fact this humble reporter gets to break the story."

"That's a promise," said Shayne.

Roarke suddenly grew silent. He took a short shot of rye all the while gazing off into space. It was the meditative stage he always assumed as his mind flashed through all the stories he had written, even read. Then, just as suddenly, he was back.

"Got something, Tim?"

"Just a glimpse. Long time ago. Real long time ago. Same M.O., I think. Five or six unsolved murders. Yeah, leather and dagger. That's it," he said, jumping up. "But it couldn't be. Those slayings happened over thirty years ago."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's hard to believe. I mean, it's been so long, but it sounds like he's back."

"Who?"

The reporter put down his empty glass. "The Beach Butcher. The Beach Butcher is back."

III

THIS CASE WAS JUST WHAT HE NEEDED, THOUGHT THE redhead. Something to get him going again. He took another sip of the coffee Lucy had brewed. Life tasted fuller now. Sure the vortex of violence was sucking him in once more, but he wasn't exactly an unwilling traveller.

Then why don't you? Lucy's words rang in his mind. Maybe this sensation was another part of the answer. A case made him feel alive, more alive than any other time. It wasn't the total answer, but Shayne had a sense that when this case was over, he'd have a final reply for his concerned secretary.

The phone interrupted his deep thoughts.

"Michael, I was about to close up shop when a gentleman showed up."

Shayne glanced at his watch. "O.K., Angel, send him in. And go on home. I'll lock up."

The redhead rose to greet his visitor, who looked quite distinguished in a banker-gray suit, a club tie, and wavy white hair. He had a ruddy face that suggested he wasn't unaccustomed to being outdoors, and he loomed almost as big as the detective.

"Mr. Shayne," he said, extending his huge right hand. "I want to thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I am Eric Stonecastle."

"Sarah's father," said the detective, noting a family resemblance. He'd have bet the man once had blond hair too.

"Yes, and it's as Sarah's father I want to talk to you. When I got home today, my daughter told me that she had asked you to investigate the tragic death of her fiance."

Shayne nodded at the new information.

"They were going to be married next month. May I sit down?"

The redhead pointed to the still undusted chair.

"Douglas was a fine young man and would have made an excellent addition to our family."

"I understand, Mr. Stonecastle, but what can I do for you?"

Instead of answering, his visitor reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a monogrammed silver cigarette case. He offered Shayne a smoke. "Turkish blend I have made just for me."

Shayne took one and accepted a light too. They were strong but very smooth. Just what Will Gentry needed.

"Did my daughter seem . . . how should I say . . . excessively emotional? You don't have to answer. You see, I'm sure she did because she is." He inhaled deeply and blew a perfect ring. "When I was a young man, like most I dreamed about women, especially the perfect woman I would marry. I would listen to opera music. My favorite was Wagner's 'Tristram and Isolde.' I would picture my future bride as the second coming of Isolde, a beautiful blond-haired woman who was as strong as I was and with whom I would achieve perfect happiness."

Stonecastle's voice was calm and low. Normally the detective wouldn't have sat around late in the day listening to some guy ramble on about German opera, but the combination of his own mood, the aromatic smoke, and the narrator's soothing voice was strangely compelling. And there was the image of a beautiful woman somewhere in the well of the detective's own unconsciousness that had been momentarily dredged up.

"Ah," continued Stonecastle, "adolescent fantasies have a way of being quite different from reality. For when I married, my wife was indeed blond, but she was not strong. And she produced a child who likewise was not as strong as she should be." Shayne's visitor stared at his cigarette. "What I am getting at is that my dear Sarah has been under a doctor's care for some time."

"A psychiatrist."

"Yes. I suppose it is a difficult thing for a father to admit — that his child is imperfect, that she needs help from someone because he has somehow failed her."

"But what do you want from me?"

Dr. Schmidt and I think that the best thing for Sarah is to put this whole affair behind her, not to draw it out. As soon as my real estate business lets up, I plan to take her on a trip to the Continent. Quite simply, it would be best for her to let the police handle the case in an official, objective manner. I feel certain they can solve it on their own. I read the papers, Mr. Shayne, and I have no doubt you could bring Douglas's killer to justice. But, in so doing you would make the whole situation too personal for Sarah."

"I think I get your drift." The detective took a last puff on the cigarette.

Stonecastle reached inside his coat and pulled out a snakeskin wallet. "I would of course be happy to pay for any expenses you have incurred plus a bonus for taking up so much of your valuable time." He began to stack hundred dollar bills on Shayne's desk.

The redhead waved him off. "No need. I haven't done anything."

"Nonsense, Mr. Shayne. I told you I know your reputation. I'll wager the minute Sarah left you this morning you were off and running."

Shayne handed the man back his money and escorted him to the door. "Thank you for filling me in on the whole thing. I think we both want what's best for Sarah."

Stonecastle smiled warmly as he left.

SHAYNE PULLED THE MARTELL FROM THE FILE CABINET AND
filled the crystal pitcher with water from the cooler. A drink would clear his lungs. The Turkish smokes had left him a bit light-headed.

Miami grew quiet as darkness touched down. Shayne sipped the Martell by the window. He couldn't dismiss the disappointment that was rising up inside him. An hour earlier he had been on the edge and now the champagne was totally flat.

It wasn't just that he liked to finish what he started or even that the case was the remedy for what ailed him. It was the case itself. It was intriguing, and Sarah Stonecastle was a person in obvious need of help.

What's best for Sarah. He hated to give it up, but he certainly didn't want to hurt an already troubled woman. And Will Gentry was a pro. He could certainly find Morden's killer . . . if he had enough men, time, and money.

Shayne glanced down at his desk. There sat the file Lucy had made up labelled STONECASTLE, SARAH. As he reached for it, he heard a sound. A door? A脚步声?

He looked up.

A tall, gaunt figure in a trenchcoat had materialized in the doorway. A fedora was pulled down over his eyebrows so that his face was indistinguishable. Framed by the dim light of the outer office, the visitor seemed to blend in the still-lingering smoke of the Turkish cigarettes.

Slowly the stranger reached into his pocket.

IV

SHAYNE KNEW HE HAD BEEN CAUGHT OFF-GUARD BY THE intruder. In a world where life and death were separated by seconds, he realized he had a heartbeat to respond. The .38 sat in the top drawer of his desk. He started to edge toward it.

"Easy, mac. I can get my hand outta my pocket faster than you can grab that gat in your drawer."

Shayne paused and studied the stranger. His voice was like a lion's roar, seemingly rolling out from the bottom of his body and echoing confidence. His stance was spread in the manner of a fighter. His movements seemed fluid and purposeful. Here stood a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

"O.K., fella, you've got my attention. Now what do you want?"

The stranger's hand came out of his trenchcoat clutching a tea-colored pint. "Just to have a little drink with the great Mike Shayne." He put the bottle down on the redhead's desk with a thud.

Shayne reached for the desk lamp. It was too difficult to see much.

"Keep it dark, mac," growled the visitor as he took paper cups from the cooler. "I know you prefer cognac to this rotgut, but tonight I'm buying." He flipped around the chair in front of Shayne and rested his arms on its back. "Hit me, mac."

"Listen, clown," Shayne started, the day already wearing on his nerves, "I've been on my feet since dawn . . ."

"So, sit down." He poured the detective a drink.

Shayne knew he should throw the intruder out — give him the bum's rush — but as he sipped the two-bit-a-gallon whiskey and stared at the shadowy figure across the desk, he didn't. His liquor wasn't as smooth as the Turkish-blend cigarettes and his voice certainly wasn't soothing, but like Stonecastle he was intriguing. Face it, guy, the redhead told himself, you're a sucker for interesting people, especially people with a story, and you can bet the ranch you're about to hear one.

"Here's to Mr. Booze," said the stranger, touching his cup to Shayne's "the one friend who never leaves you high and dry." Despite a sudden coughing fit, he tossed down the cup and quickly refilled it. "You been sniffing around the Morden case."

Shayne was noncommittal.

"I don't care if you clam up like a dead stoolie, mac, cause I know what you've been up to." He tapped a Camel on his thumb and lit up.

"If I was working on that one, what's it to you?" Shayne said, expecting the usual threat: get off the case or get offed.

"Let's just say I have a long-standing interest in such murders." He threw back his head and tossed down another.

The man's breath so reeked of booze Shayne decided not to light up. Still, the redhead had to admit, his visitor wasn't the least-bit tipsy.

"You want answers, mac? You're gonna have to dig for this one." A spasm of coughing interrupted him. "I grew up on a farm. One thing I learned. If ever you try to get rid of a rotten stump, you got to find its tap root."

The heavy smoke hung in the moist night air of the room, and the trapped heat was oppressive. Shayne turned his back, walked over to the window, and lifted it. Cooler air rushed in.

"If you know so much about the Morden murder," said the big detective, turning back toward his desk, "why don't you . . ."

Shayne left the question unfinished. The room was empty. Even the bottle of cheap whiskey had disappeared from his desk.

STILL GROGGY FROM THE LACK OF SLEEP, THE RANGY RED-head opened the door marked MICHAEL SHAYNE, INVESTIGATIONS. All night he'd felt like a rope in a tug-of-war: "I've got to know who killed Doug and why" . . . "let the police handle the case" . . . "You're gonna have to dig for this one." What should he do?

"Michael, Michael. Quick — pick up the telephone," urged his trim secretary. "Every five minutes since I got here this morning, a guy's been calling for you. He's on the phone now."

"I'll take it in the office, Angel," he said, planting a quick kiss on her exposed neck.

Inside he loosened his tie. "Mike Shayne here."

"You're a hard man to get hold of," came the voice.

"It depends on who wants me, pal."

"My name is William Morden. Sarah Stonecastle told me she'd hired you to investigate my son's death."

So many people knew about his involvement in this one, Shayne decided it must be on the cover of one of those supermarket tabloids.

"Don't," Morden said with finality. "Don't do it."

"Nobody but a client tells me what cases to take or pass on." The detective's Irish temper was starting to simmer.

"I'm sorry if I seem a little pushy. It's just that Doug was a good

son — my only son — and your cases have a way of ending up as front-page news. I don't want Doug's death sensationalized."

Shayne could hear the grief wavering in his caller's voice. "Listen, Mr. Morden, I can appreciate what you're going through, but . . ."

He heard a click and the line was dead.

SHAYNE CRADLED THE BROWN PAPER BAG AS HE HEADED through the parking garage at the miami *Daily News*. The fall flies swarmed around him in full force. Shayne swatted at them, deciding he had seen smaller birds. As he stepped onto the elevator, the detective felt good because he had made a decision. He was on the case — for Sarah Stonecastle, for his visitor from the night before, and yeah, for himself.

Rourke sat behind his VDT cursing. "Damned thing just lost my piece on vigilanteism. How people get upset with little things and turn to violence," he said, slapping the dark-faced terminal on its side.

"It's hard to believe it takes so little to set people off," said Shayne, interposing the bag between the reporter and his electronic nemesis.

"I can't tell you how many times I've gone to Dirksen and asked for my old Royal upright, B.E. — that's Before Electricity," spat out Rourke as he lit his ever-present cigarette.

Shayne lifted the bottle of rye from the bag and handed it to his friend. "Did you come up with anything more on . . . what did you call him . . . the Beach Butcher?"

"Why?"

"Just a hunch," said Shayne, recalling a piece of advice he had received the night before.

"My memory was better than I thought. It all happened at the beginning of the fifties. Six men were found over a period of about a year. All of them turned up on the beach killed just the way young Morden was."

"Did the police ever get anywhere with the case?"

"Not a single lead. Despite all their digging, Miami's finest couldn't find any similarity in the victims except that they were male. One day the killing just stopped. The official conclusion was that they had been the work of some maniac who ambushed his victims at deserted spots along the beach."

"Did the murders get a lot of publicity?"

"No, the cops kept silent on the whole mess for fear of causing panic. Back then the papers were the main source of news and editors were quite cooperative. If Watergate had been burglarized in those days, the public never would have known about it."

The redhaed scraped his thumbnail across the red stubble on his square chin. "Then you don't think that what we've got now is a nut imitating the M.O.?"

"About as much chance of that as Petey Painter giving you the Good Citizen of the Month Award. Seriously, Mike, my instincts tell me a horrible ghost from the past is about to begin another reign of terror."

An image of swirling smoke and a fedora-shrouded face shot through Shayne's mind. Had he already caught a glimpse of that ghost?

THE ELEVATOR SPEWED THE DETECTIVE OUT INTO THE underground garage. His heavy steps echoed on the concrete slab beneath him. He had turned down his friend's invitation to lunch when he realized that for now the past was a deadend. His only avenue was in the present, and that road led to the home of Sarah Stonecastle.

Shayne threw open the Buick's door — and stopped. Pinned to the driver's seat was a crudely scrawled note:

DROP THE CASE NOW

His eyes rose slightly upward. Holding the note to the punctured upholstery was a knife. The redhead pulled it out.

It was a throwing dagger with a lightning bolt insignia in its black onyx handle.

V

SHAYNE SLIPPED OFF THE CAUSEWAY AND HEADED NORTH. If Tim had been along, right about now, Shayne thought, he'd say that the rich are very different from you and me, and the detective would have to disagree. He had always found people on both sides of the bay basically alike — the same outlooks, the same motives, the same willingness to commit murder.

The Stonecastles had a Pine Tree Drive address, and some forty blocks later Shayne pulled off the broad, palm-lined boulevard onto Millionaires Row. The white-stuccoed homes with their Spanish architecture barely visible behind high fences and lush shrubbery were like blanks trying to penetrate the redhead's mind. He wanted to see Sarah alone, and he was trying to calculate the odds on that. A quick phone call had told him Eric Stonecastle had gone up to the Gold Coast and wouldn't be back till evening, but what about the size of the sure-to-be security force, the number of servants, and even whether some nurses were attending Sarah? Too many variables, so he decided on a frontal approach.

The Stonecastle estate looked more like a compound surrounded by high walls with electrified barbed wire, but the wrought iron gates were open. A Burdine's delivery truck sat idling in front of the sprawling stucco manor. Someone had been careless. Shayne eased the Buick in behind the truck and got out.

The detective peered around the truck. Just before a servant shut the front door, he saw two blond types in white pants and t-shirts, the current bodyguard apparel, carrying a table down the hall with the guy from the delivery truck. To his right Shayne spotted an unlocked iron gate and decided to investigate.

It opened into a courtyard that resembled a chessboard. Various pieces sat atop marble squares. Maybe Tim was partially right — the rich certainly had more expensive toys. Behind the far wall he heard a splash interrupt some vintage Swing music. He pushed open a wooden gate.

CLIMBING OUT OF THE SHIMMERING BLUE WATER WAS A woman in a white, one-piece bathing suit who looked like an older version of Sarah.

"Why, suh," she said on spotting Shayne, "I don't believe that you were announced." She wrapped a beach towel around herself demurely. "If you would ta-ta back to the entrance foyer and leave your card with Burke, he will announce you in proper fashion, and then you may enter."

"Mrs. Stonecastle, I . . . "

"Suh," she protested, a note of coyness crowding aside some anger, "I believe you have me at a disadvantage."

Shayne was about to remind Miss Scarlet this was Miami Beach, not Tara, when he heard a familiar voice.

"Why, Mr. Shayne, how nice to see you. Have you found out anything yet?"

The detective turned to see a different Sarah Stonecastle. With her eyes dry, a smile on her lips, and a string bikini, she looked like she had just stepped off the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* annual swimsuit issue.

"Dear?" said Mrs. Stonecastle.

"Mother, this is Mike Shayne, a . . . "

"A gentleman caller," drawled the thin woman. Her eyes seemed glazed with a faraway look. Shayne was beginning to understand what her husband had meant when he said she was "weak." She held out her hand as if she expected Shayne to kiss it. The redhead was struck by the solitary ring on her finger. The twisted piece of copper looked

like it would be more at home in a Cracker Jack box than in these elegant surroundings.

"Now, Mother, Burke has a delicious lunch waiting for you on the veranda," Sarah said, leading her away. "Why don't you change and I'll join you in a few minutes."

The older woman glided to the sliding glass door as though she were going through a welcoming line at the debutante's ball. "You be sure," she said pausing, "dear, to bring your gentleman caller to lunch." Her voice lilted as she spoke. "Goodness gracious, he does have such broad shoulders. Perhaps we can chat about his family over the shrimp salad. We can't be too careful you know."

"Mr. Shayne," Sarah said apologetically, "you'll have to forgive my mother. She's . . ."

"A charming woman."

The string-bikinied figure glanced at him quizzically. "How did you get in here?"

"I'm afraid my engraved invitation must have been lost in the mail."

"After what happened last night, I'd have thought the guards would be more careful."

"What did happen?" said the redhead.

"Around midnight somebody broke into the estate."

"With your lax security that's understandable."

"Kurt saw him on the west stairs up to my parents' bedroom and chased him away just in time."

"Just in time?"

"Kurt said he was carrying a pistol."

"Did you call the police?"

"No." She stared down at one of the marble slabs that surrounded the olympic pool. "My father's a very private person. He said we'd had enough bad publicity what with Doug getting killed."

Even though the blue-eyed blonde had been outside only a few minutes, her cheeks began to flush and sweat formed along her hairline. Shayne started to lead her to a nearby bathhouse.

"That's Daddy's workshop," she managed. "It's locked."

He took her to an umbrellaed table and poured her some icewater from a pitcher sitting there. Even in October the noon Miami sun was as merciless as a cornered terrorist.

"Did anybody get a close look at the intruder?"

"No, it was dark. But you didn't come out here to talk about that."

Shayne said, "I'm trying to do what you hired me to." From her reaction the detective was certain her father hadn't mentioned his

visit to Shayne's office. "To find out who killed Doug and why." Shayne's instincts wouldn't buy Tim's theory of a returned maniac, of motiveless killing until he'd done some nosing around.

"What can I do to help?"

"Tell me who would want Doug dead."

"No one," she said immediately, "except maybe his father." Then, realizing what she had said, she added, "Not really. It's just . . . they were always at each other's throat. Doug once told me he and his father really got along until he told him he wanted to go to work for his dad's construction business."

Shayne made a mental note of her admission. "How about Doug's job? Was there any case that might have brought him an enemy?"

"I really couldn't say. You'd have to ask Tommy Joe, his partner."

"I doubt Mr. Crutcher would breach a client's relationship with his firm, but Doug might have said something to you."

Shayne put out his butt. The day was hot enough already. The detective was conscious of the pressure he was applying, and he watched Sarah's reactions. She had gone from fidgety fingers to now rubbing her temples with her eyes closed. The more he prodded, the more withdrawn she became.

Suddenly her eyes opened. "One day Doug did mention to me he'd gotten some threatening phone calls."

"About what?"

"He was defending an Arab student at Miami International." She buried her face in her hands. "Something about his killing a Jewish classmate."

"Do you remember his client's name?"

"Harbus . . . Harpi . . . Harbi. It was such a strange name Philip Harbi."

Shayne had seen the tears coming. Her body grew tense and she began to sob. Gently he took her hand and in a soft voice he said, "Thanks, Sarah. You've been a big help."

A pain shot through Shayne's left shoulder as he felt steely fingers bite into his flesh. "Get your hands off Miss Stonecastle, turkey."

"Kurt, no," said Sarah, looking over his shoulder.

"Wolf, get over here. I found the bozo who belongs to the beatup Buick."

BECAUSE SARAH WAS SITTING IN FRONT OF HIM, OBVIOUSLY in no shape to witness violence, Shayne fought back his best instincts. Instead he grabbed Kurt's fingers and slowly forced them backwards while standing up. Gradually his opponent's knees buckled in the face

of Shayne's superior strength.

"Look, pal," Shayne said coolly, "I'm not here for trouble. I've had my talk with Miss Stonecastle and I'm about to leave. Only I leave on my own, got it?"

Footsteps told Shayne Wolf had arrived. The blond man was about Shayne's height and build — plus he carried a billyclub. He lunged at the redhead, who started to move but couldn't without letting go of Kurt.

The billyclub thwacked into his kidneys and Shayne fell to his knees. The assailant brought the club down hard toward his head. Shayne threw himself backward and the blow caught Kurt across the forearms.

"You stupid crud," he screamed at his partner.

The billyclub came at the redhead like a scythe, and Shayne retreated. He heard a scream — this time it was Sarah. After losing her fiance, any violence would have set her off. She began to wail, an unhealthy sound Shayne had heard before — in the halls of a mental institution.

Now they both had clubs and were bearing down on him as he retreated past the diving board. The estate had him boxed in. To get out he was going to have to go through those two. They were careful, the redhead noted. Obviously they had been sent to some kind of training school, but there was a relish in their eyes — not that of bodyguards but of men who loved to inflict pain.

He backed into the pool's pump. Leaning against it was the basket they used to skim leaves and grass out of the pool. He quickly unjointed it. Now he had a shaft about ten feet long.

Two people, one a butler and the other a maid, were helping Sarah up. A club came down toward his temple. He brought the metal rod up, blocking it and in one motion wheeled the rod's right end around. Kurt grimaced as the shaft struck him under the right eye.

Wolf suddenly forgot about attack procedures and lunged at him. Shayne deftly stepped aside and brought the shaft into his opponent's knees. Wolf pitched forward and into the pool.

Shayne spun around to face an angry Kurt. Using the end of the pole like a cattle prod, Shayne began to poke the husky figure in the gut, forcing him back a step at a time. A jab caught Kurt in the ribcage. The man flinched and Shayne speared him. Kurt spilled into the pool.

Sarah was gone and the two men were splashing frantically in the water. Obviously their training had not included a course in how to swim.

As the detective shut the gate to the pool, he wondered where was a lifeguard when you really needed one.

VI

AS SHAYNE PULLED THE BUICK OFF A-I-A JUST ON THE fringe of Hollywood, he recognized Eric Stonecastle pulling away in a Mercedes sedan. Palm Towers, one of the many condominium projects that had replaced private homes, looked like a tall, gray tombstone. The detective caught up to William Morden getting into a crane bucket.

"Mr. Morden, Mike Shayne. Can I have a few words with you?"

Morden rolled an unlit cigar stump in his mouth. "I got to check out some plumbing on the twelfth floor. If you don't get nosebleeds, hop on." He pitched the redhead a hardhat.

Shayne got in the bucket behind the bulldoggish figure, who removed his cap to wipe his bald head. He looked in his sixties, yet he seemed to move like a much younger man. Suddenly they started to rise.

"Our conversation was cut short last time," said Shayne.

"No need to continue. I wanted you to forget the case — and you didn't want to."

"About the case, I understand you and Doug didn't get along."

The contractor glared at him. "Look, buddy, we got along real well once he accepted not working for me."

"What did you have against him working for you?"

"Look at these arms," said Morden. They were muscular, dirty, and covered with scars. "This business marks a man. You got kids, Shayne?"

The redhead shook his head.

"Then there's no way you'll understand that I wanted my son to have it better than I did. I wanted him buying condos, not building them." He spat at Shayne's feet as the bucket continued to rise. "End of interview."

"I suppose I'll just get off here," said the redhead sarcastically.

Without saying a word, Morden raised his hand. The bucket came to an abrupt halt, then started to drop. Shayne felt his stomach rising up into his throat. The ground rushed up quickly to greet them.

Suddenly the bucket stopped. Morden smiled at the redhead. Scarcely a foot separated them from the sandy soil.

"I believe this is my floor," said the detective, tossing his helmet at the contractor.

AS SOON AS SHAYNE RETURNED TO HIS OFFICE, LUCY TOLD him that Gentry had called and asked the redhead to meet him at the morgue. Shayne was still puzzled as he entered through the back door

as Gentry had asked him to.

The police chief had a worried look pasted across his crusty face. "I know I shouldn't be doing this, and if we're caught, it's my ass in a sling. But, old friend, you have a way of getting to the heart of the matter quickly."

Shayne asked, "What's up, Will?"

Gentry led him down a dark corridor and into an empty room that had an odor like dead chrysanthemums. In its middle stood a solitary gurney covered by a sheet. Gentry drew it back.

Shayne spotted the leather thong tightly wound about the gray layers of skin. "He was killed with this." The cop showed Shayne a familiar looking dagger.

"You sure?"

"Fairly. It was sticking in the old man's heart."

"Did you find him on the beach?"

"Early this morning. And yeah, everything's the same as with young Morden."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Name's Bober, Morris Bober," Gentry read from a notepad. "Owns a grocery store near the Orange Bowl."

Shayne studied the naked body that had suddenly stopped aging. He had seen a lot of corpses close up in his time, but one thing distinguished this one. Above his wrist, faded blue numbers identified him as one of the few who had escaped The Final Solution. Now someone had done to him what Der Fuhrer had failed at.

"Leads?" asked Shayne.

Gentry looked the redhead in the eye, and the redhead swore he saw fear deep inside. "Mike, we got nothing and I'm getting desperate. The city fathers are breathing down my neck, and I don't know how long I can keep this one under wraps." He pulled the shroud back over Bober.

As the morgue door slammed shut and he stepped into the hot night air, the redhead didn't feel much like a cigarette. Tim's ugly ghost was becoming a flesh and blood nightmare.

SHAYNE SAT BACK IN HIS EASY CHAIR AND FELT THE COGNAC flow warmly through him. From outside, the night-time curses and blaring traffic horns assaulted his ears. The Beach Butcher, if that indeed was who it was, seemed to be gaining on him. Right now he had no more than Gentry and there had been a second murder.

He rolled the brandy snifter between his palms. What did an old Jewish grocer have to do with a young Miami Beach lawyer? And how

were their deaths connected to something that had happened over thirty years ago? What part did a hard drinking tough guy play in this drama?

Shayne sipped the tepid cognac as though each drink were the last drop on earth. Had Morden told him the truth about his relationship with his son? The contractor had certainly proven himself capable of violence. But kill his own son? Then there were the Stonecastles — not exactly Ozzie and Harriet. Why had somebody broken into the Stonecastle's house with a gun?

The redhead freshened his drink. Two leads seemed promising or at least they had better — they were all he had. Or, well, maybe Tim was right and the killings were random, the work of a maniac. Even lost deep in contemplation, Shayne heard the self-service elevator stop on his floor. Over the years he had developed an internal security system that worked without him so willing it. Leather soles scuffed the worn hotel carpet softly, but the detective could still tell they were moving in his direction.

He pulled the *Daily News* off the table beside him and readied himself. Still barely perceptible to most ears, the footsteps paused before his door.

"Come on in. It's unlocked," called out the redhead. "I've been expecting you."

VII

THE GOOSNECK LAMP THAT EARLIER SHAYNE HAD AIMED AT his front door illuminated his visitor.

"Kill the light, mac. This is no lineup," came the voice from beneath the fedora.

Shayne flicked the lamp off. In its glare his visitor had looked smaller than the night before and older. His face was drawn, wrinkled, and his eyes were hollow under the hawk-like eyebrows. As the figure shut the door and stepped forward, Shayne detected a slight limp.

The detective reached into his folded newspaper.

"You can put away you rod, Shayne. If I'd a wanted to ventilate you, I could have plucked you outta that cherrypicker at Palm Towers or when you came outta the morgue with Gentry."

Shayne put his .38 beside the phone — still visible. "Look, pal, we're too old to play Blind Man's Bluff. It's about time you told me who you are and what your interest is in these killings."

His visitor unbuttoned his soiled trenchcoat. Wearing a double-breasted, pin-stripe suit, he looked to Shayne like he once hung around with Edward G. Robinson and George Raft.

"Shayne, you got anything to drink a little stronger than that soda

pop you're swigging?"

The big redhead got up and walked over to his liquor cabinet. He found a half-filled bottle of rye he kept on stock for Tim. From the kitchen he got a glass. His visitor accepted both and filled the glass to the top.

"Cheers," he said.

Shayne hit him with questions right away. "Why are you so concerned about this case, and what did you mean by 'long-standing interest'?"

"Thirty years ago a guy named Freed was a victim of the so-called Beach Butcher. I vowed then I'd get that mug if it was the last thing I did."

"Who was this Freed?"

"A good friend," said the stranger, draining his glass and pouring another. "Just a good friend."

"Why did you wait thirty years to start after the killer again?"

"I didn't. The ache in my gut's never stopped. It's just that in '51 the creep pulled down the curtain. But I've been waiting. I knew he'd kill again." The stranger drained the second glass. "And then I'd get him."

"An eye for an eye."

"You called it, mac."

"Why did you come to me?"

"Simple. You're the best in the business — now. If anybody round here can track down that . . ."

"Maniac," offered the redhead.

"Not on your life. I said it then and I believe it even more now — there's a pattern to this guy, a reason for all those killings years ago and the new ones." He stood up and put the bottle in his trenchcoat pocket. "Well, it's time for me to amscray. Oh, by the way, the moniker's Ransom."

Then he was gone with a swiftness that belied his age.

NEWS TRAVELED FAST IN THIS SECTION OF TOWN, DECIDED the redhead. The dead grocer's shelves had already been stripped clean by the local piranha. The door at the address Gentry had given him earlier that morning was ajar when he had arrived. The floor was littered with boxes that had been torn and gutted as well as bottles that had been shattered in the frenzy of looting. Quite a tribute to a man who had stayed in the middle of a declining neighborhood because, as Gentry had told him, Bober had lived there since immigrating to America right after World War II and felt it his home.

A curtain separated the store from the grocer's private quarters. Drawers had been rifled inside, and clean bare spots on the floor suggested that Bober's furniture had become a midnight discount item. A copy of a Sunday *Daily News* from which something had been ripped lay beside a large cabinet that had its glass cracked but nothing removed from its inside. And why should it, thought the redhead. What did a few faded pictures of skeleton figures in front of crowded barracks, a flyswatter made of what was undoubtedly human hair, a torn lampshade constructed with leaden-hued parchment mean to a bunch of crazed looters? Yeah, Bober had brought with him more hideous souvenirs than the tattoo on his arm.

Shayne's stomach felt uneasy at it all. The wars never stopped. Oh, you could think you were rid of them. A bunch of old men in morning coats and top hats could agree to a paper peace, but the bloodshed continued, sometimes on the beach, sometimes in your own neighborhood, and always it drew closer.

"So what's a matta, goy?" challenged a voice. "Your friends beat you to the punch?"

Shayne looked up. Parting Bober's curtain were four punks wearing the typically gaudy uniforms of a Miami street gang. With unkempt beards, hats straight out of *Fiddler on the Roof*, and long, black coats on which they'd stenciled the Star of David, they looked like an absurd parody of a group of rabbis.

"Nyah, Hymie," said another, "he don't understand what's behind the glass."

Hymie, the kid Shayne pegged immediately as the gang's leader, approached him. "Hey, Red, how would you like to contribute to the old man's museum?"

The quartet had drawn so close to Shayne he realized that he'd have a hard time getting to his .38 in the small of his back. "Who are you?" he said. "The local tour guides?"

"Here is not Little Ireland," said a tough, "in case you're lost."

Knives were all they had, decided the redhead. Anything else would have been visible by now to help with their intimidation. "You guys have any idea who wanted Morris Bober dead?" he tried.

Later, Shayne thought that one of the juveniles might have answered him because he called the grocer by name.

"From around here nobody. Everybody loved old Morris. He gave them credit when the banks wouldn't."

"Not only to Jews," boasted another, "to everybody."

"Shut up your mouths," interrupted Hymie. "The mick's one of them."

"Them?" said Shayne, bristling at the slur.

Hymie stroked his untrimmed beard. "Non-Jews, the enemy. That's something old Bober didn't understand. I warned him not to give you *goyim* credit. No matter what you do or say, you're just waiting." He pointed to the cracked cabinet. "Waiting to send us there, to the death camps. We get you first — that's what the Scion of Zion is all about." He raked his finger across Shayne's throat.

"I can see you've got a great grasp on what prejudice really is," said Shayne sarcastically. "It's a good thing for all the Aryans *you* weren't the one making speeches in those Munich beerhalls."

With that Shayne in his best imitation of Moses parting the Red Sea started forward. The members of the gang stepped back and allowed him to pass.

"Ah, let him go," said Hymie, waving a torn newspaper clipping. "We got more important business."

Shayne remembered Sarah Stonecastle's mention of the phone calls warning Doug Morden not to defend the Arab student. Well, a defender of an Arab would certainly qualify as an enemy of the Scion of Zion.

Prejudice, thought the redhead as he climbed into the Buick, didn't mark a man physically, but it could be just as damaging.

SHAYNE OPENED THE DOOR TO THE NEWS' MORGUE. HE would have liked to talk with Tim, but his reporter friend was out of the office. If anybody, though, knew more than Tim about Miami past and present, it was the lady behind the desk. She had helped him before, and the big redhead had a hunch she could do it again.

She looked up from her computer terminal as he approached and smiled. "What's the word, Mike?"

"Ransom, with a capital *R*, as in trenchcoat, fedora, and a voice that sounds like it comes from the bowels of the earth."

The silver-haired woman removed her glasses. A sultry smile formed on her face, almost causing it to lose its wrinkles. She gazed toward Shayne, but right through him. "Ransom. Haven't heard his name in so long. Fact is, I never heard his first name. Oh, you can take your Tyrone Powers and Clark Gables — he was better looking than all of them. But tough. He could have stepped into the ring with Jake LaMotta."

"Too bad your memory's so poor," quipped Shayne.

Her laugh betrayed a slight embarrassment. "You'll have to pardon an old woman's fantasies, but back in the late 40's I don't think there was a woman in Miami who wasn't in love with him."

"What was he? A male model?"

"You don't know?" She touched the tip of her glasses to her lips. "I've never told you this, but you've always reminded me of him. Ransom was the best darn detective this town ever saw — present company excluded, of course."

"Does the name Freed mean anything to you?"

"Sure. Dick Freed. He was Ransom's partner." A shadow swept across her face. "Until he was killed."

"How?"

"Stabbed by the Beach Butcher, but I don't suppose you've heard of him either. A real psycho. Hitchcock should have made a movie about him. That year he was on the prowl nobody went near the beach. Seems to me he disappeared about the time Freed was killed. You know, that was 1950. Ransom closed up his agency and dropped from sight. That's about it." She chuckled. "All I know is what I read in the papers, but you might check with Sgt. Piper over at Gentry's little island of safety. If memory serves, he and Ransom were thick as thieves. Bad figure of speech, but you know what I mean."

"Thanks for the information," Shayne said, getting a sudden inkling as to how Ransom knew so much about the recent beach murders as well as his own progress on them.

"Sorry I carried on so, Mike. I guess it's hard to realize that the past is dead."

"Not necessarily," said the redhead. "Not necessarily."

VIII

THE CASE WAS LIKE AN OLD PAINTING YOU FOUND IN THE attic, thought Shayne. With each bit you dusted off, the picture became a little clearer. His friend in the newspaper morgue had been helpful to a point, and he knew just where to go to connect the next dot.

Even before Shayne reached the Missing Persons department, he could tell Sgt. Piper was in. The familiar odor of a tuna and garlic sandwich had probably driven the squad out to an early lunch.

"Eating alone again, Pipe?"

"I am indeed honored, sir, that Miami's famous shamus would descend to visit little ole me. Can I offer you half of my Snickers bar for dessert?"

"No thanks. I'm on a diet," said Shayne, wondering how many stars the *Guide Michelin* would award Piper's lunchroom.

"Then what can I do for you, Shayne?"

"Tell me exactly what happened thirty years ago involving a detective named Ransom, his partner Freed, and the Beach Butcher?"

Shayne had come right to the point, and his abruptness struck a

sensitive spot. Piper just folded up his sandwich and tossed it in a trash can.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, wiping the tuna fish from his bushy mustache.

"Don't worry, Pipe. I'm not going to tell Will Gentry you've been giving out official police business to a friend. It's just that your friend is in dangerous waters, and I think I can help him."

Piper studied the redhead, and those steely eyes told him all he had to know.

"O.K., Mike, everybody knows you're a man of your word. Ransom — that's the only name his friends knew him by — ran a little agency with an old army buddy Dick Freed. They'd helped each other out of a lotta tight scrapes in the ETO and decided that after that action Miami'd be a piece of cake. The two were like Mutt and Jeff, Unitas and Berry, tuna and garlic."

Shayne winced.

"Till that dame came along. A real high-class looker. Freed fell hard. Started neglecting everybody, everything, especially his job. Left Ransom holding the bag more times than not. Well, things got worse and they had a falling out. Each started working alone. Every day Freed was on this land fraud case of some kind, and every night he was squiring this broad to all the hotspots. He got in over his head with both. Finally the case got too much and one day he broke down and asked his former partner to help him make some contact on the beach. Ransom had a lot of pride and said no, so Freed went out to the beach alone and never came back."

"The nut on the beach?" said Shayne.

"Everybody but Ransom thought so. He was convinced that there was method to the Beach Butcher's killings and that Freed's death had something to do with the land fraud case, but Freed never kept records and so Ransom couldn't prove it. Course he tried. The guilt on Ransom's back was heavier than the field pack he carried through World War II. That's when he hit the sauce — hard. The more he couldn't dig up about Freed's murder, the more he drank. Finally he just quit and faded away like an old newspaper — until this week."

"Pipe, how do you know so much about the man?"

"Long time ago a rookie cop got himself bottled up down on Miami Ave., and a P.I. risked his own neck to pull the cork out."

Shayne put his hand on the sergeant's shoulder. "One more thing, Pipe. Can you tell me where to find Ransom now?"

THE TENEMENT STOOD IN A SECTION OF TOWN KNOWN affectionately as the Black Hole. Shayne knew it as one of those pockets of poverty that was so rundown not only had most of the residents departed, but so had the rats. The ethnics and refugees wouldn't go near it, and the politicians couldn't find enough voters in it to make it worth their while to cry out for urban redevelopment.

Shayne pulled the Buick into a sunless alley behind an old, pre-finned Merc that had more rust than black paint on it. Leaping up, the redhead grabbed the fire ladder and pulled hard. With most every door and window boarded, it had to be the major means of entry. Shayne smiled as he tried to picture the man in the trenchcoat climbing up this thing after a few too many drinks. On the third floor the detective found an open window and peered it.

The flat was sparsely decorated. Most of the plaster was cracked, and several holes had been poked through the ceiling. A couch in the corner, a single lightbulb dangling over a cheap Formica table, a pile of old newspapers. In a straight-back chair sat Ransom staring into a bottle of cheap whiskey.

Shayne grabbed the sill to pull himself through. It creaked.

"That you, Freed?" called out the low voice.

Surprised, Shayne only grunted.

"Finally come to your senses and dropped the Belle of Savannah?" His body never moved as he spoke.

All the way inside now, Shayne just stood and eyed Ransom, who was lost in his reverie. It didn't make sense to the redhead. Here was a man who from all accounts was the best, a superior detective, a man who had helped many and now by choice was a shell, a lush who was killing himself pint by pint. A momentary shudder vibrated through Shayne — could this be the inevitable result of a man who lived too close to violence too long, a man like himself?

Ransom turned slowly in his stupor. "About that meet at the beach, I can't . . ." He blinked his glazed eyes and shook his head. "Shayne, what are you doing here?" He got up and drew back his fist in slow motion. "Nobody sneaks up on me." He swung, hitting nothing but air and lurching forward.

Caught between anger and pity, the redhead grabbed the drunk. "If you're gonna be any help to me, pal, you're gonna need something in your gut besides that battery acid."

THE FOUR-BLOCK WALK TO THE KOFFEE KUP HAD HELPED clear up Ransom's head. The diner was so shabby Shayne half-expected his meal to be delivered by cockroaches.

"I didn't need this, Shayne," said Ransom, wolfing down his third greaseburger.

As the redhead called for more joe, his eye caught a torn newspaper on the counter. Of course. He should have followed up on that immediately. "Try not to burn yourself," he said. "I've got to make a call."

It didn't take his female friend at the newspaper morgue long to run through the last few Sunday's *Newses* for him. The picture in Hymie's hand had been from the Real Estate Section and had contained a familiar face.

The redhead walked back to the counter. Ransom, his hands wrapped around the steaming cup, was unconsciously clinking a cheap copper ring against its side to the beat of a juke box tune. Staring into the long mirror behind the counter, the ex-detective seemed to Shayne dismayed at the bloodshot eyes peering back through bloated cheeks.

"I wanted to talk to you about the Beach murders years ago," said the redhead, "but it'll have to wait. Something urgent's come up."

"Hey, mac, don't do me any favors. I'd be O.K. without you."

Without warning Shayne exploded. "Sure you would, pal. Tell me about all the cases you've worked on the last thirty years. Tell me how many people you helped, tough guy. Tell me how many people still look up to you. Tell me how many bottles labelled Self-pity you've put away. I don't know about you, but every morning when I go to shave, I can still look myself straight in the eye."

Shayne threw a ten-spot on the counter. "I can pay people what I owe." He growled in Ransom's face, "Don't steal the tip!"

THE ADDRESS, WHICH HE HAD FOUND IN THE PHONE BOOK, was in Bal Harbour, the opposite end of Miami Beach. Shayne had thought of calling Petey Painter, but it was just a hunch and Painter made a habit of getting in his way.

The big detective spotted the beat-up Chevy parked down the block as he drove past the house. Across the Causeway he might not have noticed the car, but amidst the Cadillacs it stood out like a white player in the NBA. So they were inside already. Was their prey? He doubted it. They would do their work and get away or so he figured. Well, there was one way to find out.

Shayne parked the Buick on a parallel street directly behind the house and cut through the backyard. A pane in the rear door had been broken. Shayne reached through and silently opened the door. He heard a noise in the living room straight ahead and someone on the second floor. He ducked behind a tall sideboard in the dining room as a figure in a long black coat entered.

"I'll check in here, Hymie," the kid said and began to rifle the sideboard.

In one motion Shayne cupped his left hand over the kid's mouth and brought his right hand down hard across the kid's neck. Lights out.

Shayne was rolling the unconscious body under the dining room table when he felt the cold metal point on the back of his neck.

"O.K., mick, just stand up real easy."

The big redhead turned to see a grinning Hymie behind a switchblade that looked like a machete. "Any of you fellas know if a mick bleeds green?" asked the leader.

Shayne stared at the four bearded youths who gathered around him. Part of his suspicions had been right.

"What are you doing here, Hymie?" said Shayne, trying to put it all together.

"Bober and me, we disagreed on lotsa things, but we both agreed on our common enemy — anti-Semites. The night he was skagged, he told me to come by. Nobody was there. The next day just before you show up I found this picture he left for me." He showed Shayne the clipping from the *News*. Standing in front of an unfinished condo was a smiling William Morden.

"Why do you think Morden's your enemy?" said Shayne.

"Evidence, as the cops say. Show him what we found hidden behind some loose paneling in the upstairs closet, Josh."

The kid threw down a well-used, brown duffle bag and pulled out a few items. A Luger, a scrapbook with a swastika on the cover, S.S. patches, a faded picture of a squad of German soldiers labelled BLITZ, and a pair of daggers with a lightning bolt insignia.

IX

Somewhere in the back of his mind Shayne recalled that *Blitz*, as in *Blitzkrieg*, was the German word for lightning.

Hymie went on. "Old Bober had told me he went to the guy in the newspaper picture as soon as he recognized him and said if he didn't turn himself in as a war criminal, he, Morris Bober, would. Seems clear now what happened. The Kraut got Bober first. Now we're gonna get him."

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Scion," Shayne spat out.

"I like that, goy. But since you're in the way, we're gonna have to waste you too. Can't have any witnesses around."

At that moment the back door broke open. "Then, punk, you'll have to silence the two of us."

For a split-second the gang turned toward Ransom. It was all Shayne needed. He grabbed Hymie's wrist and twisted it behind him. As the

knife dropped to the rug, Shayne pushed him forward. He crashed into the rest, where they tumbled like so many bearded bowling pins.

Shayne's fist connected with the first to get back to his knees. As the redhead started to hit him again, he was jumped from behind by the kid he'd decked earlier. Shayne spun around and rammed him into the sideboard. Some china cracked along with a bone.

"Easy, mick," yelled Hymie.

Shayne looked up to see the leader behind Ransom, his knife at the older man's throat.

Hymie said, "All right, you guys, let's get out of here. We can get Morden any time."

Hymie stood there with his knife ready to slit Ransom's throat. In a minute Shayne heard the Chevy revving in the driveway.

"*Shalom*," said Hymie, shoving the trenchcoated figure into the big detective. By the time Shayne got around Ransom the Chevy was squealing down the street.

Immediately Shayne called Gentry and told him to put out an APB for the Scion of Zion — he'd explain the whole thing later.

"Come on, Ransom," he said, not unmindful of the distraction the big man had pulled. "If you're with me, you can ride in the Buick. At least that way I can keep an eye on you."

"Shayne, I just thought I could help." For the first time the bluster was missing from his voice. "Maybe it's been awhile, but . . ."

But the redhead didn't listen. Something in the photograph Morden had saved caught his eye. Shayne read the names of the soldiers: Mordhofer, Streible, Burkhardt, Mann, Schmidt, Von Klapp, then shoved the picture into his coat pocket.

MORDEN HAD GONE UNDERGROUND. HIS OFFICE DIDN'T know where he was. A drive up to Palm Towers with the slowly sobering Ransom had brought nothing. Finally, as darkness descended. Shayne pulled off by a phone booth. Maybe Sarah Stonecastle knew something about where her almost father-in-law was.

The voice at the other end of the phone came in sporadic and honeyed tones. "It's for me, Eric. Why Mister Shayne . . . no, she's not here at the moment. Perhaps you'd like to stop by and have a cocktail. We could wait for Sarah to return from her appointment — together."

Shayne felt the acid trying to cut through his stomach. "Appointment. Who with?"

"Why Mr. Morden, of course. He sounded so upset, but who wouldn't be after the death of a loved one? Anyway, he asked Sarah to meet him."

"Where?"

"I probably shouldn't have been lis'nin', but I do believe he mentioned a Cedar Point."

"One last thing. Are you originally from Savannah?"

"However did you know?"

Shayne hung up without answering and got back in the Buick. The night air already felt a bit chilly. "Come on, Ransom. We're gonna take a drive to Cedar Point."

The tall figure almost seemed to stop breathing. "That's . . . that's where Dick Freed was murdered."

X

Cedar Point. Another murder? Two detectives. Past and present. An eye for an eye. Yeah, thought Shayne, it was all coming full circle. Even Cedar Point was just a little way down the beach from where the two thugs had beat up on Doug Morden.

The wind was blowing hard and cold off the bay as the two determined men got out of the Buick. Winter was coming early, decided the redhead.

"Think Morden's out there, Shayne?" said Ransom.

"It's a perfect set-up." The detective strained, but all he heard was the surf crashing and snarling against the shore. "You said Freed was killed out here. Exactly where?"

The tall figure who looked almost like Shayne's shadow pointed toward a concrete pavilion about fifty yards and thirty years up the beach. "That's one place I'll never forget."

They split up, Shayne coming in from the bayside. A naked bulb lit up the structure, but the big detective couldn't see anything. He moved closer.

At ten yards away they saw it simultaneously. Stretched on the concrete slab lay a body, its life draining from a hole in the head. Drawing still nearer Shayne spotted a Luger on the ground beside the figure's left hand.

"Place hasn't changed much since I was here last. There's even a stiff on the floor like before," said Ransom laconically as he rolled the body over with his foot.

Strapped to the body's belt was a leather sheath containing the familiar lightning-bolt dagger.

"The Beach Butcher commits suicide," said Shayne flatly.

"So it appears," answered Ransom with a short laugh that to Shayne sounded like one of his own.

Shayne pulled out the black and white picture from his coat and showed it to Ransom. "William Morden a/k/a Mordhofer."

"A Nazi who couldn't stop killing."

Shayne glanced around. "Where's Sarah?"

The two men looked at each other, knowing they didn't have to speak to communicate. The circle wasn't complete yet, thought the detective. He flipped Ransom a quarter. "There's a phone booth back where I parked. Get Will Gentry out here. I'm going after Sarah."

As Shayne stepped past a very sober Ransom the light from the overhead bulb glanced off the copper ring that the redhead had spotted in the diner.

The big detective connected one more dot in the picture.

SHAYNE THOUGHT ABOUT THE GERMAN CONNECTION — the Aryan-like thugs, the Wagner opera, even the capitalized *C* on Case in the warning note. By themselves, nothing, but together He parked down the street from the Pine Tree Drive house. Taking out the first guard was easy. He was asleep. The second never heard Shayne crawl up behind him commando style until it was too late. The redhead locked them both in the guard house.

He found only two more men in his way, and both of them he recognized immediately. Ordinarily he would have liked to finish what he had started on the beach, but there wasn't time. He took the first one as he appeared in front of the mansion. A .38 to the skull put him out at least until morning. The last blond guard he caught up with at the pool. Expecting his friend, the guard didn't recognize Shayne until too late. Shayne's foot caught him in the groin, and the redhead's powerful right shut his mouth before he could scream.

Shayne knew just where to go, and he had a pretty good idea what he was going to find inside. As he crept to the boathouse, he mentally chided himself for not figuring it out sooner — a couple of more lives might have been saved.

The voice drifted out into the cool Miami night. "Now that you know the whole story, I'm going to have to eliminate you both." A loud slap followed and then tears. "Look at me. Look at me as I really am and know that like everybody else who has come close, you will carry my secret to the grave."

Shayne twisted the doorknob cautiously and peered in through the heavy smoke with the pungent aroma of a Turkish blend. Standing beside her sitting mother was Sarah Stonecastle, her face strained in agony.

Raising the .38, Shayne stepped into the light. "O.K., Captain Burkhardt," he said, "the war's over."

Looming behind the two similar-looking women was Eric Stonecastle

dressed in the dark uniform of a German S.S. officer. Shayne's eye immediately caught the shining silver lightning bolt insignia on his lapel and the Luger in his hand.

"After forty years, a worthy adversary. I'm sure you have rendered my guards useless."

"Most of your Aryans are sleeping off headaches."

"I should have known that neither my money nor my warning note could keep a man like you off the case. I salute you, Mr. Shayne. Tell me," he said, resting his swagger stick on the huge oak table behind him, "how did you know my real name?"

His eyes still trained on the Luger, Shayne couldn't help but take in a large Nazi flag flanked by pictures of Hitler and other Third Reich elite on the back wall.

V

"Morden had a picture collection of his own." The redhead held up the wrinkled black and white. "You were a little younger then, but not that hard to spot."

"And now I am the only one left from the death squad called Blitz." Burkhardt laughed gutterally. "Rather clever change of names. Stonecastle is, of course, the English translation of Burkhardt. Ah, dear Lt. Mordhofer. Unlike the rest of our squad, he couldn't wipe out the vestiges of conventional morality and thus was never as totally committed to the Reich."

"What about the others you took out as the Beach Butcher?" said Shayne.

Burkhardt's laugh was a habit. "A catchy epithet, reminiscent of my friend The Butcher of Buchenwald."

"I don't know how you got into this country after the war, but I'd guess those people you killed somehow knew about your real identity."

"A few Jews from the camps, a soldier who once served under me, and a detective who got too close to me" — he looked at his horror-stricken wife — "and the beautiful Nancy. People of no consequence." He tossed his wife's hair with his swagger stick. "It amazes me that Americans stopped us in that war. You are too soft. For a few useless secrets, your government not only let me into this country, but also established a new identity for me."

"You shouldn't have spoiled your golden years by bringing the Beach Butcher out of retirement," said Shayne, with acid covering every word.

"The so-called Butcher would have remained a thing of the past if that *Dummkopf* Mordhofer had done as I and kept his face out of the papers."

"The face that Bober spotted a few weeks ago."

"When that old Jew told Mordhofer he knew who he was, my ex-lieutenant, who with me had entered this country, panicked and ran to me. He was going to tell the whole story, even what he had loyally kept quiet about for so long — my tidying up around the beach thirty years ago."

"But you convinced him not to."

"He would have maintained his silence if it hadn't been for his son."

Shayne picked it up. "Mordhofer told his son the truth, and his son threatened to tell Sarah if you didn't. You sent two blond-haired bully boys down to the beach to discourage him."

"Ah, yes, enter Michael Shayne, private investigator."

"But Doug had a little more fight in him than you figured. Your beating enraged him and the Beach Butcher had to shut his mouth. While you were at it, you did in the other loose end, Bober, on the chance he had linked you and Morden."

"This is good. Go on."

Shayne obliged. "If I don't miss my guess, your midnight intruder with the gun was Mordhofer coming to kill you to avenge his son."

"Mr. Shayne, you deserve your reputation, and you would appreciate the exquisite irony of my using the very gun he brought from his house to kill me" — he laughed — "for his . . . suicide."

Looking at the glazed eyes and twisted smile of the hulk in the black uniform, Shayne decided the insanity that had dwelt within the man all these years had finally taken over. "You've just about wrapped up all the loose ends, haven't you?"

"All but three. One is the lovely Nancy whose money and name helped me establish myself, but whose weakness caused her to take up with a cheap detective."

"Dick Freed."

"Was that his name?"

Nancy Stonecastle was trembling as she rubbed the copper ring on her finger.

"So Freed's death had nothing to do with that land fraud deal."

"Nothing whatsoever. I grew tired of her affair, of her throwing up in my face how tender and caring — how weak — he was. I made a habit of listening in on her phone calls. One night he called to set up a tryst after he had made some contact on the beach. It was simple for a man who had been one of Der Führer's favored assassins to ambush a mere private detective."

"That leaves two," said Shayne, his gun still pointed in Burkhart's

direction.

"The frail Sarah. Yes, when Mordhofer called tonight, as I knew he would, I followed my daughter. I listened while he told her the whole story, and then I helped him commit suicide."

WATCHING BURKHART WAVE HIS LUGER BEHIND HIS WIFE and daughter so callously, Shayne realized in all his years he had never met a man whose morality had been so distorted, a man with a total absence of conscience. Shayne said, "Your only problem seems to be that loose end number three has a gun."

"Between you and me are two women. If you don't put your gun down in five seconds, I'll put a bullet into Sarah's blond head. You will hesitate to shoot. I won't."

Shayne didn't.

In the scant inch between the two women his .38 slug passed before tearing into Burkhardt's chest. The killer flew backward, knocking over his Nazi shrine.

Shayne stood over the bleeding madman and holstered his gun. "You can't be right all the time."

"Mr. Shayne," called Sarah, "something's wrong with Mother."

The redhead pivoted to see Nancy Stonecastle slumped in the chair. He knelt down beside the pallid woman and checked her. "She's O.K.," he announced. "Just fainted."

Sarah Stonecastle screamed in his face.

Shayne wheeled around quickly, but not fast enough. A kneeling Burkhardt had cocked his arm. In his hand he held an onyx-handled throwing dagger.

"*Auf Wiedersehen,*" he promised through blood-drenched teeth.

Shayne jerked for the .38, knowing how little time he had.

A gun exploded behind Shayne, and Burkhardt froze momentarily at the point of release. Blood trickled from his forehead as he pitched forward, his eyes still open in shock.

In the doorway the tall trenchcoated figure stood holding a smoking snub-nose.

"Hey, mac," he said to Shayne, "if you're gonna be as good as Herr Burkhardt said you were, you're gonna have to learn to cover your backside."

"Ransom, I . . ."

"Tell it to your friend Gentry. He'll be a little hot under the collar when he arrives. I had to borrow one of his black and whites to get here."

"I wasn't sure you'd show," said the detective.

"I had to." Ransom's eyes fastened on a revived Nancy Stonecastle and drifted down to her ring. "The dame's still a real 24 carat doll. I can see now why Dick couldn't comb her out of his hair." He took off the matching ring and handed it to Sarah's mother. "When I found Dick on the beach, his last words were, 'Give this to Savannah and tell her I care.' "

Shayne stood up and faced Ransom. "What turned around thirty years on the skids?"

"When you made me look at my face in the mirror, it took awhile, but I finally remembered why I got into this dirty business in the first place."

"Why's that?"

Ransom slipped his piece into a shoulder rig. "I put my life on the line for people and I do it because most can't — I can."

Shayne smiled. He now had what he'd been looking for, the answer to Lucy's question.

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On the floor, between the bed and window, were two people. Their eyes were closed, their features were composed and peaceful. They seemed to be sleeping, but their bodies were as cold as carrion!

The Happy-New-Year Murders

by MEL D. AMES

AN UNEASY QUIET HAD SETTLED LIKE A PALL OVER THE FIRST dark hours of the New Year. The maudlin strains of *Auld Lang Syne* had long since faded into the night and the old house had grown as cold and as silent as a tomb.

Upstairs, in the master bedroom, Brenda Weise woke with a premonition of death. *Something* was terribly wrong. She was alone in her bed, but that, in itself, did not alarm her. Hans had recently taken to sleeping on a mattress on the floor beside her bed, to be close at hand if she needed him, yet not to disturb her fitful slumbers.

They had already resigned themselves to her dying, she thought bitterly, and she had begun to sense a growing impatience in them as she hung tenaciously on from day to day, to the thin remaining thread of her life. She turned with a twinge of pain to peer apprehensively over the side of the bed. She could see his face, impassive and pale in the half light. He was stretched out on his back, and in the crook of his arm, with her auburn curls spread out over his pajama-top, their five year-old daughter, Linda, was cuddled close against him.

She frowned, gazing down at them. And with some grim maternal insight, perhaps, and a slow dawning of horror, she became acutely certain that she was then no longer among the living. *Either she, herself, or (God forbid) the man and the child on the floor beside her, was dead.* And then, as though to remove all doubt, a mortal moan escaped her own trembling lips.

THE STREETS OF METRO WERE UNCOMMONLY QUIET AS Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers and her inseparable side-kick, Detective-Sergeant Mark Swanson, headed toward the Weise home in the early morning hours of January 1st.

"A brand new year," the Lieutenant said brightly, "and almost no one out to greet it."

"Most people did their Happy-New-Year-ing last night," Mark replied, with a bleary-eyed glance at his beautiful, wide-awake companion. "They're all toes-up now, sleeping it off."

"More's the pity," the Lieutenant said reprovingly. "So, what did you do last night?"

"Well —" Mark braked the unmarked Chevy to an idling stop at an intersection. "To tell you the truth, Lieutenant, after I left you at the Precinct, I drove down to Slater Street on the East Side, picked up one of those sexy car-hoppers, a big, beautiful, bra-less blonde with a short skirt and willing ways, and we spent the night at my place with a bottle of Southern Comfort, making passionate love —"

Cathy Carruthers laughed. "Sounds like fantasy time to me." The light changed and the car began to move ahead. "Tell me, Mark, what did you really do?"

Mark sighed ruefully. "I had a quiet evening in front of the tube with two old friends, Johnny Walker and Guy Lombardo. I fell asleep before everybody started kissing everyone else's wife in Times Square."

"Now that, I can believe," the Lieutenant said with mock accord, "But I do think you should do something, Mark, about that subconscious predilection you apparently have for blondes, booze, and depravity in general."

"I'm working on it," Mark grinned, "but I'm only up to the blondes."

THE CHEVY SWERVED INTO A SIDE STREET LINED WITH ten-foot hedges, typical of the area, then pulled over and stopped in front of a pair of towering iron gates. Mark touched the horn.

A man emerged from the gatehouse that sat back and a little to one side of the entrance. He was unordinarily large, a hulking brute of a man, and the face he pressed against the vertical iron bars of the gate would have curdled the milk in the breast of a pregnant witch.

"Watcha want?"

Mark flipped his badge at the man without getting out of the car. "Police," he said, "open up."

The face drew back and the gates opened moments later with squeals of protest from rust-encrusted hinges. "There are more police

vehicles on the way," Mark said to the man as he drew abreast of him, "might as well leave it open."

"You do your job," the surly gatekeeper grunted, "and I'll do mine."

"Suit yourself, Igor." Mark flashed the man an irritating smile and headed the car up the long, gravel driveway.

"You certainly have a way with people," the Lieutenant chuckled. She inspected her beautiful face in the mirror of a small compact. "What have we got on this case, Mark, other than it being a double homicide?"

"Not much," Mark said as he rounded a curve in the driveway and the huge, rambling, tudor-styled house suddenly loomed before them. "Father and daughter. The daughter's apparently only five years old."

"Sad. Any suspects?"

"Sure. Plenty. But that's not the problem."

"Oh?"

"There's not a mark on either one of them, Lieutenant — to indicate how they might have died."

"So? That's a job for the coroner," the Lieutenant replied indifferently. "Besides, if they *are dead*, *something* must have killed them."

"Yeah, well — the guy who phoned it in, a Stanley Dunlop, said there were three people sleeping in the same room. Mother, father and daughter. The mother was the only one who woke up this morning. And, oddly, she was the one who wasn't supposed to."

"May I ask why?"

"She's terminally ill with cancer, Lieutenant. She's been on borrowed time for the past month."

The car ground to a gravelly halt and the Lieutenant alighted quickly. "Mark, get on the radio and request a couple of special uniforms." She had turned, and her golden head was suddenly, beautifully framed in the open window. "Bones and Madson, if they're available. I want a man on the gate and that refugee from a horror movie brought up to the house. We may want to question him."

"Ah, yeth," Mark responded, mimicking the sinister Karloff lisp. "Who knowth what evil lurkth in the hearth of ugly gatekeeperth —"

"That's a good Shirley Temple, Mark," the Lieutenant called back as she took off toward the house. "Can you do Boris Karloff?"

MARK WATCHED HIS SENIOR PARTNER CLIMB THE FEW short steps to the front entrance with mixed feelings. She was still the

same Cathy Carruthers he had teamed up with more than a year ago, and their light-hearted gibes were nothing more than a verbal facade to cover the deep respect and affection that had grown between them. But, to those who worked with her, she was also *The Amazon*. Not just in light of her magnificent, six-foot, honey-haired physique, but her frequent manifestations of such uncanny strength and prowess, that she seemed to transcend all restraints of mortal blood and muscle.

Mark had long since given up trying to penetrate the legendary mystique of the Amazon; he had learned, instead, to be content just to accept and enjoy Cathy Carruthers, the beautiful earthling.

The Lieutenant was standing in the lower hall at the foot of the wide, central staircase when Mark caught up with her. She was in conversation with a thin, gray-haired woman, a private nurse, Mark guessed, from the way she was dressed.

"Ah, there you are, Mark. We've been waiting for you."

Mark was conscious of a claustrophobic closeness in the rich decor of the old house. He was literally surrounded by dark, polished paneling and heavy floor-to-ceiling tapestries, and the staircase that wound up to the second floor looked wide enough to be an off-ramp on the Metro Central freeway.

"Bones and Madson are on their way," he told the Lieutenant.

"Good. Mark, this is Elly McBain, Brenda Weise's private nurse." The woman was visibly distraught. "She's going to take us up to the room where the deaths occurred."

"I put Mrs. Weise into another room, poor dear," Elly McBain told them as they climbed the stairs, "what an awful shock it was and all."

"You were the one who found the bodies then?"

"Well, not exactly. I heard Mrs. Weise crying, and choking, and carryin' on somethin' terrible, from where I slept in the room next to hers. Just at daybreak it was. She was knowin' they was dead, poor dear. She knew before I even got to them. Cold and stiff as a line of winter wash they was, frozen rigid, just the way they was layin' there."

The gray old nurse hesitated at a door that opened off the upper hall. "They're in there," she said, standing back. She was obviously reluctant to enter the room.

"We'll take it from here, Miss McBain." The Lieutenant opened the door and stepped into a room that was cloaked in semi-darkness. "Let's get some light in here, Mark."

Mark moved quickly to the window and a moment later, as the heavy drapes flew apart, the blinding light of day flooded into the room.

THE LARGE DOUBLE BED THAT DOMINATED THE ROOM WAS empty now, but on the floor, between the bed and the window, the bodies of Hans Weise and his daughter, Linda, lay silently entwined. They looked to be sleeping. Their eyes were closed, their features peaceful and composed. There was no sign of violence. No blood.

The Lieutenant stooped over the bodies and touched their ashen temples with a red-tipped finger. "Hmmm," she mused. "Cold as carrion. They must have died shortly after midnight."

"Any idea what killed them?" Mark asked.

"Not really, but there is a skin discoloration that could suggest asphyxiation."

"Like a pillow held over the head?"

"Something like that, but yet, it's inconsistent with the total lack of any sign of struggle. People don't just lay there and allow themselves to be smothered, now do they?"

"Maybe it was something they ate, or drank," Mark suggested. "Poison of some kind."

"But again, Mark, one would think there would be some sign of pain or discomfort on their faces. These two look as though they quietly passed away in their sleep. It looks to me more like carbon monoxide poisoning — a gentle, painless death."

"Like from the exhaust of a car?"

"Yes. But if the girl and her father *did* die from CO fumes, how come the mother is still alive?"

"Well, the victims are close to the floor," Mark said thoughtfully, "would that have any bearing?"

"I think not, Mark. Carbon monoxide, if released in here, would quickly permeate the entire room."

"Maybe the M.E. will be able to shed some light on it," Mark said hopefully.

"I certainly hope so."

The Lieutenant's vivid blue eyes surveyed the room with cold deliberation. A small, white, almost imperceptible stain caught her notice, just below the lip of the window sill. "Mark, see if you can get a sample of that white stuff down there. Have you got an envelope?"

"Yeah." Mark knelt over the stain and began to scrape at the surface of the carpet with his penknife. "Seems almost moist," he said.

The Lieutenant had now lifted her attentive gaze to the window. It was closed but not locked; her fingers freely rotated the open crescent catch. Then, on the exterior surface of the lower pane, she could clearly see a small grouping of finger smudges.

"Miss McBain," the Lieutenant called over her shoulder, "who would be responsible for the cleaning of these windows?"

The nurse stood nervously in the open doorway, unwilling, it seemed, to move in beyond the threshold. "Well, I'm not exactly responsible for them, Lieutenant, but I do the windows in here."

"Can you recall when you last cleaned them?"

"Why — why, yesterday. Late yesterday afternoon. I do them several times a week. It's the poor dear's only look at the world, Lieutenant —"

"I understand, Miss McBain." The Lieutenant joined her at the door. "Did you clean both sides of the windows? Outside, as well as in?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"You're certain of that?"

"Yes."

"All right, Miss McBain. You may go. There will be more policemen arriving shortly. Perhaps you would be kind enough to direct them up here, to this room."

"Yes, Ma'm."

AS THE NURSE'S FRAGILE PRESENCE LEFT THE OPEN FRAME of the doorway, another taller more voluptuous figure took its place. An attractive, full-bodied girl in her mid-twenties studied the Lieutenant with open hostility. "Just *who in hell*," she said, "are *you*?" Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders and she stood with arms akimbo, looking fit and trim in snug-fitting jeans and a white tailored shirt-blouse.

"My name is Cathy Carruthers," the Lieutenant said with an officious smile. "Detective-Lieutenant, to be precise, Metro Central, Eleventh Precinct, Homicide." She flashed her badge. "Now, may I ask, who in hell are *you*?"

The young woman was somewhat taken aback. "I — I'm Marilyn," she stammered. "Marilyn Dunlop. Brenda Weise is my mother. I — I didn't realize that you were a policeman — I mean —"

"I know what you mean." The Lieutenant softened her tone in an attempt to take the edge off their conversation. "Dunlop is your married name?"

"No. I'm not married. Heaven bloody forbid. I'm Brenda Weise's daughter from her first marriage. She only married Hans about six years ago, eight bloody months after my father died. Would you believe it? Linda, thank God, is their only child."

"When did you learn about the death of your stepfather, and

Linda?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Elly woke everyone up when she found them. I helped her move mother to another room while Stanley phoned the police."

"Stanley?"

"That's my brother. Stanley Dunlop. He went back to his room to get dressed. That's if Denise lets him out of bed long enough to get his bloody pants on."

"Uh-hu." The Lieutenant drew a patient breath. "And who might Denise be?"

"Stanley's ever-lovin', Lieutenant. She steered him to the marriage waterbed about nine months ago, then threw out the anchor. They've hardly touched dry land since, except for an occasional midnight sally to stock up on booze and bloody band-aides."

"Hmm, yes, well — " The Lieutenant cast a wondering look in Mark's direction. Mark seemed to have found something amusing in the stain on the carpet. "Is there anyone else in the house, Miss Dunlop, other than your brother and his wife, (yourself, of course), and your mother's nurse?"

"That's the whole Dunlop-Weise menage, Lieutenant — or should I call you Cathy?"

"And the gatekeeper," the Lieutenant added, ignoring the girl's flippancy.

"Oh, yeah." Marilyn Dunlop smiled indulgently. "Gunga Din."

"Gunga Din? That's his name?"

"His name is Gunther Dinsley. Everyone calls him Gunga Din. He's not too bright, you know." She made a wry face. "A bit of a — duh."

"Then why do you keep him around?"

"He's loyal," she said simply.

Officer Madson's face suddenly appeared over the girl's shoulder. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, officer."

"That guy you're talking about — that freak at the gate?"

"Well?"

"He's refusing to come up to the house."

"That so? And you've come for reinforcements?"

"No, Mam — Too Tall Bones is with him now. He just wanted your permission to use, uh — necessary force."

The Lieutenant chuckled. She had little doubt that Too Tall Bones could handle the hulking gatekeeper, but she shared the big black's obvious concern that it could prove to be a little messy.

"Tell officer Bones to wait until I get there," the Lieutenant told Madson. "I shouldn't be too much longer here."

AS MADSON LEFT, THE OTHER POLICE CREWS BEGAN TO arrive in force. Marilyn Dunlop was obliged to retreat into the hall.

"Perhaps you could get your brother and his wife to meet me downstairs in the living room," the Lieutenant told the blonde girl. "I would like to ask them both a few questions."

"Whatever you say, Cathy." Marilyn Dunlop smiled disarmingly. "I'll see if I can catch them between tussels."

The Lieutenant smiled in spite of herself as the girl moved off down the hall, then turned in time to see Elly McBain coming out of a door directly across from the death room. "Is that where you've put Brenda Weise?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Yes, Ma'm." The nurse closed the door softly on the darkened room. "We've kept the poor dear heavily sedated for weeks now," she said in a hushed whisper, "but all this has upset her so."

"Is she asleep now?"

"Yes."

"Well," the Lieutenant pursed her lovely lips. "We'll let her be for the time being."

Mark appeared at her elbow. "The lab crew kicked me out," he laughed. "They said I should stick to my own job, like being a snoop."

"Did you give them the sample?"

"No. They took it."

The Lieutenant began to descend the stairs and Mark followed. "What now?" he asked.

"I think I'd better check on Gunga Din."

"Too Tall can handle him," Mark told her.

"I don't doubt it, Mark, but that big ape is apparently lurching around on square wheels, and I don't want him hurt."

"I'll go with you," Marilyn Dunlop said from behind them. "He'll do what I tell him. Anyway, Sodom and Gomorrah won't be down for a little while yet. They're in the shower. Together."

The Lieutenant laughed. "Be my guest," she said, then, turning to Mark, "Check in on Brenda Weise while I'm gone, Mark. If she should wake up, I'd like to know if she saw or heard anything unusual during the night."

"You got it, Lieutenant."

As Mark left them, Marilyn Dunlop said, "Do all your stooges acquiesce with such lap-dog humility?"

"Don't confuse cooperation with weakness, Miss Dunlop," the Lieutenant told her quietly. "The biggest mistake of your life could be to misjudge a man like Mark Swanson."

THEY WERE IN SIGHT OF THE GATEHOUSE, WALKING SIDE BY side across the expansive grounds, when Marilyn Dunlop suddenly staggered and fell, her left foot firmly wedged in a gopher hole. The Lieutenant bent over her and attempted to free the trapped foot, but the blonde girl cringed away from her with a cry of pain. Then, from the vicinity of the gatehouse, there was a sudden, guttural roar of anger. The Lieutenant looked up to see Gunga Din bearing down on her in an obvious rage.

"Run, Cathy!" the girl cried out. "Run! He thinks you're hurting me."

In the background, behind the advancing giant, the Lieutenant could see Too Tall Bones scrambling out of the patrol car. "Come back here, you hunky horror," he thundered. But he was too far back to enforce the command.

The Lieutenant came out of her crouch in an effort to side-step the ugly gatekeeper's first onslaught, but the blonde girl, in trying to take the painful pressure off her ankle, shifted the position of her trapped leg. The unexpected movement was enough to trip the Lieutenant and send her sprawling into the flying ham-like fists of Gunga Din.

The Amazon was momentarily helpless. She felt a row of hairy knuckles slam into the side of her mouth, snapping her head to one side, hair flying, and a split second later, a club-like fist plowed brutally into her lower abdomen. Pain and nausea exploded through her body, and she seemed to just hang there, like a broken Barbi Doll, half way to the ground, as though not yet willing to give in to the dizzying, inescapable tug of gravity. Then a giant fist grabbed a handful of her honey-colored hair and drew her into a suffocating, rib-crushing bear-hug.

"Gunner! Let her go!" Marilyn Dunlop's frantic cries fell on ears that were deaf to anything but that all-consuming rage, and Too Tall Bones was still fifty feet away from being able to lend assistance.

But the slow tightening of Gunga Din's vice-like embrace seemed to suddenly clear the Amazon's pain-fogged brain. She shook her golden head, and found herself looking squarely into the crazed and rheumy eyes of her assailant, her face just inches from the foul, rasping mouth. Her arms were pinned to her sides, her body crushed against him, her long legs dangling clear of the ground.

"Let her go! Gun-ther! Don't you bloody hear me? Let her go!"

The Amazon heard the girl's futile pleading as she now reached within herself, to draw upon that awesome power that lurked like a sleeping giant beneath the pulchritudinous surface of her body. She let out a cry that resembled the squall of a wounded beast, and Too Tall

Bones stopped dead in his tracks. He watched in amazement as the Amazon's imprisoned body suddenly coiled and flexed, and two nylon-clad knees shot up with pile-driving force into the gatekeeper's unsuspecting groin. A terrible roar of pain and anger blared out of the big brute's mouth and his grip loosened abruptly.

Then, as she regained her feet, and her balance, the Amazon swung into action. With extended knuckles, Karate fashion, she leveled a stunning blow to the man's throat, and then another, in rapid combination, to the temple. The big man's knees buckled, but before he could fall, she had one hand at his collar, the other at his waist, and had jerked him clear off the ground. Her superb body seemed to contort like a steel spring as she sent him hurtling into the arms of a speechless Too Tall Bones.

"Chain him up to something," the Amazon said as she wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth, "before he really hurts someone."

Too Tall Bones cuffed the dazed gatekeeper and led him limping toward the house. "I just wouldn't never believe it," the big black mumbled as he passed the two women, "if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. And what's more," he turned to look back at the Amazon, "I still don't."

Marilyn Dunlop laughed nervously. "I know how he bloody feels," she said. "Wow! You don't mess around, do you, Cathy?"

Cathy Carruthers blushed with the ingenuousness of a school girl. "I think we'd better get you back to the house," she said. "If the M.E.'s still there, he can take a look at that ankle."

"Yes, *Ma'm*," the girl said with a note of new respect. And she leaned heavily on the Lieutenant as they turned and began to hobble painfully after the two men.

STANLEY DUNLOP AND HIS WIFE, DENISE, WERE STANDING AT the door to the living room when the two women re-entered the house. Mark had just descended the wide staircase.

"What happened?" he said with quick concern, seeing the Lieutenant's disheveled appearance and the smudge of blood at the corner of her mouth.

"Gunga Din got a little too friendly," Marilyn Dunlop told him. "Like I said, he's a little — you know." She rotated a finger around one ear.

Mark ignored the girl. "You all right?" he said to the Lieutenant.

"I'll live." She gave him a crooked smile. Her upper lip was already beginning to swell. "Is the M.E. still here?"

When Mark nodded that he was, she said, "Don't let him leave without seeing me." Then as the group moved out of the hall, Mark went back up the stairs to the second floor. Too Tall Bones, Gunga Din, and Elly McBain were already in the living room, waiting.

"Well, Lieutenant, got it all figured out?"

The man who spoke could not have been anyone other than Stanley Dunlop. He was a clean-cut, darkly handsome man of about thirty. The woman who stood close at his side, holding his hand, was so much like him she could have passed for his younger sister. She had raven hair and smoldering blue eyes, a striking combination, and she seemed very much aware of her slender, elfin body. The way she was dressed, it looked as though she had just painted on a short, powder-blue skirt and a matching blouse, without feeling the need for either a primer or a second coat.

"You, then, are Stanley Dunlop," the Lieutenant said.

"Yes. And this is my wife, Denise."

The Lieutenant drew herself up to her full, impressive height and looked searchingly from one to the other of the small gathering. "I must confess," she said with slow deliberation, "I'm not a little surprised at the apparent lack of grief, or even concern, in a family that has just been dealt a double tragedy."

"Well — " Stanley Dunlop shrugged his shoulders. "The girl's death is a tragedy, of course, but Hans Weise is no great loss, Lieutenant."

"Amen," added Marilyn Dunlop.

"I find that rather callous," the Lieutenant admonished the blonde girl. "However, our investigation will proceed. Sergeant Swanson and Officer Bones will be taking statements from each of you. You will then be fingerprinted and asked to remain on the premises until I specifically, and personally, give the release order."

"And when will that be?" Stanley Dunlop wanted to know.

"When we find out how two people out of three, in one room, mysteriously died during the night from no apparent cause, and who, if anyone, was responsible."

"What about my job?" Marilyn Dunlop limped over to a vacant chair and sat down with a low moan. "I'm not like these other free- loaders, you know. I've got to bloody work for a living."

"Where do you work?"

"M.R. & P.," the girl replied. "Metro Reefers and Packers. They'll be expecting me to show up tomorrow."

"I think you'd better call in sick," the Lieutenant suggested. "You've got good reason with that ankle. And how about you, Mr.

Dunlop? What do you do?"

"Nothing," Marilyn answered for him, "outside of the bloody bedroom, that is."

Denise Dunlop responded with a demure smile. "My, doesn't jealousy go well with your nasty nature, Marilyn dear?" she said sweetly.

Stanley Dunlop quickly interceded. "I manage my mother's estate, Lieutenant. Our father, Marilyn's and mine — Oliver J. Dunlop — left a rather elaborate portfolio of financial holding. Mother seems to feel that it was more in keeping with father's wishes that I, a Dunlop, handle the purse strings, rather than her — her paramour."

"You refer, of course, to Hans Weise."

"Of course."

"Was there any resentment on the part of Mr. Weise?"

"Uh-hu," he reflected, with the hint of a smirk, "you could say that."

"Did you ever argue about it?"

"Constantly. But never in front of mother — "

"You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?" A relatively short man with a balding pate stood in the doorway. He was carrying a black medical bag.

"Oh, Sam," the Lieutenant called to him. "May I have a word with you?" She steered the usually grumpy M.E. to the far side of the room, out of earshot of the others. "Have you got anything yet that I should know about?"

"Sure. Two dead, one dying."

"Sam, be serious."

"Two dead, one dying isn't serious?"

The Lieutenant attempted a thin smile. "What happened to your lip?" the M.E. asked with a concern that surprised her.

"Somebody didn't like my face, I guess."

"They must've been blind or crazy. Want me to treat it?"

"I'd rather be treated to a couple of straight answers."

"Shoot."

"What killed them?"

"I don't know."

"Guess."

"Well, if all three had died, my first guess would have been CO poisoning, carbon monoxide. As it is, I just don't know. You'll have to wait until I get them on the table."

"Time of death?"

"Shortly after midnight, give or take a little."

"You're being unusually cooperative, Sam."

"Yeah. It's that thick lip. It looks like you're leering at me." He turned to leave. "I just got carried away for a minute."

THE LIEUTENANT DIRECTED HIM OVER TO WHERE MARILYN
Dunlop was sitting nursing her ankle. "This is Dr. Morton, Miss Dunlop, would you like him to take a look at that leg?"

Sure. As long as he confines his looking to below the knee."

"Relax, young lady." The chunky coroner was suddenly his usual, ill-humored self. "To interst me, the first thing you'd have to be, is dead."

The blonde girl grinned and held her leg out to him, but she yelped with pain a moment later as he began to examine the already swelling ankle. A low, menacing growl rumbled out of the throat of Gunga Din.

"I hope you've got a leash on that brute," the M.E. said, looking warily at Too Tall Bones.

The big black laughed. "Don't worry, Doc. His bark's worse'n his bite."

"That's easy for you to say," the Lieutenant complained with a bit of a lisp.

Mark came into the room then, and drew his senior partner to one side. "I managed to have a few words with Brenda Weise. That's sure one sick lady."

"Did you ask her — ?"

"Yeah. She doesn't remember a thing, Lieutenant. Just woke up and found them dead."

"She's kept pretty heavily sedated, Mark. I wonder what made her wake up when she did?"

"I asked her that. She said she felt cold."

The Lieutenant turned to Sam Morton who had just finished taping the girl's ankle. "Don't you think Mrs. Weise would be better off in a hospital somewhere?"

"Absolutely."

"She won't go," Marilyn Dunlop interjected. "Says she wants to die in her own bed."

"How long do you think she has?" the Lieutenant asked the coroner.

"Twenty-four hours, at the outside."

Marilyn Dunlop stood up and tested her weight on the bandaged ankle. "That's what they said four weeks ago."

Sam Morton shrugged indifferently. "Want me to treat that lip now?" he asked the Lieutenant.

"How, for Pete's sake?"

"He'll probably try to talk you into mouth-to-mouth resuscitation," Marilyn Dunlop suggested dryly. "You can't trust a guy who'd rather cavort with a cadaver than a real live doll."

The M.E. picked up his bag and headed for the door. "This just isn't my day," he muttered.

The Lieutenant laughed. "Call me when you get something tied down, Sam." To Mark, she said, let's get this wrapped up. We don't seem to be any closer to an answer now than when we started."

"What'll I do with our heavy breathing friend, Lieutenant?" Too Tall Bones wanted to know.

Cathy Carruthers ran the tip of her tongue over her fat lip as she looked at the hulking gatekeeper. "You can take the cuffs off, Bones, but keep your eye on him." She regarded Marilyn Dunlop thoughtfully. "I don't imagine he'll wander very far."

The blonde girl lowered her gaze, then hobbled over to where Gunga Din stood rubbing his wrists. "I'll be responsible for him," she said. "He just needs someone who cares."

"He could also use a collar and a distemper shot," Too Tall Bones rumbled, "and a very short chain."

IT WAS LATE THE FOLLOWING MORNING BEFORE LIEUTENANT Carruthers received the promised call from the coroner. She was in her office at Metro Central's Eleventh Precinct when the call came through. Mark Swanson was slouched comfortably in a captain's chair, facing the Lieutenant's desk.

"Carruthers."

Mark watched his senior partner's beautiful face register, in quick succession: relief, hope, doubt and disappointment, in that order. "That's all you can tell me, Sam? On both of them?" The Lieutenant gave Mark a look of helpless despair. The tip of her pink tongue toyed with her swollen upper lip as she listened. "Okay, Sam," she said finally. "I know you did your best. Yes, the lip is just fine. You, too."

"What, what?" Mark inquired anxiously as she returned the phone to its cradle.

"He says they died of suffocation. That's it, Mark. Suffocation. No marks, no bruises, no blood, no nothing. Their deaths, he says, are a direct result of a sustained lack of oxygen."

"But how — ?" Mark's puzzled features seemed to make the words superfluous.

"He has no more idea than we do."

"Son of a gun," Mark muttered. "Talk about your dead ends."

"Mark." The Lieutenant leaned back in her chair in a thoughtful

pose. "Get Leprohn up here right away."

"I talked to him half an hour ago," Mark replied. "He said he didn't have a full report yet."

"I want him here *now*," she said quietly but firmly. "And pick up the Lab report on your way, whether it's ready or not."

Mark knew better than to question the merits of her request. He'd seen her go into this thoughtful stance before, when faced with what she intriguingly refers to as a "puzzler." The solution to the double, New-Year's Eve murders, Mark decided as he left the office, would soon be history.

CORPORAL GARFIELD LEPROHN, METRO CENTRAL'S SHORTEST police officer, stood four-foot zip in his b.v.d.'s, and a dizzying four-foot four in his Elevators. His prowess in data gathering was fast becoming legendary at the Eleventh Precinct, but, for all his success, he could not escape that infamous epithet, *The Leprechaun*, as he was ungraciously referred to by his colleagues. Mark Swanson took a special, perverse delight in irritating the little cop at every opportunity.

When Mark re-entered Lieutenant Carruther's office with the Leprechaun in tow, he stuck his head in first and did a credible imitation of Tattoo's opening line in *Fantasy Island*.

"The plane, the plane!" he intoned with spiteful glee.

The Leprechaun was not amused. He stormed in under Mark's outstretched arm and stood red-faced in front of the Lieutenant's desk. "To complain about your partner's childish behavior, Lieutenant, would be to give it a dignity it does not deserve. Instead," he postured, with a withering look at Mark, "I simply choose to ignore it."

The Lieutenant was doing her best to hide her own amusement by feigning discomfort with her swollen lip. "Were you able to complete the file, Garfield?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Except for a few loose ends that aren't really all that important."

"Good. And Mark, how about the Lab file?"

Mark handed the brown manilla folder across the desk. "In a nutshell, Lieutenant, the fingerprints on the outside of the window belong to Gunga Din. And that white stain on the carpet is some kind of alcohol residue. They're still doing tests on it."

"Alcohol? A spilled drink, perhaps?"

"Search me," Mark shrugged, "but what's more important is the fact that Gunga Din was definitely at that window some time during the night. And by the way, Lieutenant, there's a small balcony outside the window, with no fire escape and a second-story drop (I checked it out)

and there's also an old elm with an overhanging limb that comes within half a dozen feet of the balcony."

"Hmm. It's beginning to look bad for Gunga Din. But what was he doing out there, I wonder? And if he did kill Weise and the child, how? And why?"

"Maybe I can shed some light on it, Lieutenant," the Leprechaun chimed in. "Gunther Dinsley has only worked for the Weises (Dunlops?) for a few months. About two years ago, he was caretaker and off-season watchman at a Summer Camp that was owned and operated jointly by three private schools for girls. He was something of a conversation piece, needless to say, with both students and faculty, but they considered him harmless enough, until he was caught peeking in the girls' dormitory windows one night, just before lights out. He was severely admonished, of course, but when he was caught doing the same thing a week later, he was charged and institutionalized."

"You mean they sent him to the Funny Farm?" Mark interjected.

"That is precisely what I mean," the Leprechaun replied coolly. He consulted his files. "They kept him there for about a year, then released him. And he showed up a few months later at M.R. & P. (Metro Reefers and Packers), where Marilyn Dunlop works. He was soon in trouble again when someone spotted him peeking in the window of the ladies' washroom. They were going to call the police, but the Dunlop girl pleaded his case and offered to take him off their hands. For some reason, she seemed to be the only one who could control him, then, and now."

"Interesting," the Lieutenant mused. "Do you have any more background on Miss Dunlop?"

"Not a lot. One thing, though, she's a real loner. She doesn't appear to have any close friends, either at work or at home. She has been employed by M.R. & P. for just over six years, first as their book-keeper, then, about two years ago, she was moved up to Branch Comptroller. She is quite an accomplished person."

"Am I right, Garfield, in assuming that M.R. & P. is some kind of cold storage warehouse and shipping terminal?"

"That about covers it."

"Now what about Stanley Dunlop, and Denise?"

"Just what they appear to be, Lieutenant." The Leprechaun flipped over a couple of pages. "He manages his mother's estate, and is expected to continue to do so (on a lesser basis, of course) after her demise. And that, as you know, is imminent. The remuneration he receives for his accounting efforts appears to be more than adequate to sustain his, and Denise's, somewhat reclusive life style, especially

when you consider that everything is "found" for them. It's plain to see that Stanley was, and is, his mother's darling."

"Denise?"

"A local-girl who married well. She hails from a middle-class, middle-income family, and is obviously much enamored of her new husband, not to mention the rather elite neighborhood she now calls home. They've been married nine months now, and she is looked upon by all (even Marilyn) as an expensive but harmless toy for Stanley."

"On the other hand," the Leprechaun went on, "Hans Weise, who also feathered his nest by marrying into Dunlop money, was regarded from the outset as a bit of a cad, a fortune hunter. He was thoroughly disliked by everyone, except, of course, Brenda. And even she seemed to have serious reservations about trusting him too far."

"What about Elly McBain?"

"Elly McBain?" The Leprechaun ruffled through his hoard of data, much to Mark's annoyance. "She seems to be genuinely fond of her patient. She has her R.N. ticket, which permits her to administer certain medications, and the light housework she does is purely voluntary, and gratuitous, on her part. She will, of course, be out of a job when Mrs. Weise finally succumbs."

"And that's it?"

"That's it, Lieutenant." The Leprechaun closed his file with an exaggerated flourish. Mark groaned. "Oh, one thing more. There's a will (by Mrs. Weise, I mean, not Hans. *He* doesn't have a penny) and we can reasonably assume that it will name Stanley and Marilyn as principal beneficiaries (in view of it being Dunlop money), with a probable, generous settlement to Hans and their daughter, Linda, plus a small sum, perhaps, to Elly McBain. But I must emphasize that this is mere conjecture on my part. Only the death of Brenda Weise, and the legal disclosure of the will can tell us for certain — "

THERE WAS A SUDDEN RAP ON THE DOOR AND TOO TALL Bones leaned his great head into the office. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything, Lieutenant, but I would like a word with you."

"Come in, Bones. Corporal Leprohn is just leaving." The Lieutenant smiled her appreciation as the little cop handed her the file. "And as usual, Garfield, you've done a superb and thorough job. Thank you."

The Leprechaun beamed and did a Jesus walk out of the office, two inches above floor level.

"I got a six year-old bigger'n him," Too Tall said with a deep chuckle when the door had closed behind the Leprechaun. "And the kid don't wear nothin' but sneakers, neither."

The big black took a chair, then settled comfortably into a slouch that seemed to compete with Mark's convoluted sprawl. The Lieutenant smiled as she waited with measured patience. "Now that both you male brutes are firmly ensconced on your own shoulder blades," she said testily, "maybe we can get on with it."

Bones shifted his great weight uneasily. "I'm not sure whether this is important, Lieutenant, but I figured you ought to know about it."

"Know about what Bones?"

"Well, I'd been trying to keep an eye on that weirdo, Gunga Din, yesterday, like you told me to, but once in a while he managed to slip away from me. Last night, about ten o'clock, I missed him again, and I went looking for him. I finally found him up in the room where the bodies had been. It's empty now, and — Jeeez, Lieutenant, you're not going to believe this."

"Try me."

"Yeah, well — he wasn't alone, Lieutenant, Marilyn Dunlop was with him, and I do mean *with* him. They hadn't heard me come in and it was a few seconds before they spottéd me."

"What were they doing?"

"She was just standing there, Lieutenant, with her arms hanging limp at her sides, letting him touch her with his bloody great paws, and nuzzle his ugly face against her cheek and her hair, and all the while he was simpering and fawning over her like some kind of dumb animal."

"There is no way that you could be mistaken about this, Bones?"

"No way, Lieutenant."

"What did they do when they saw you?"

"The big creep was upset, as you might expect, but he didn't try any rough stuff. He looked to be too mesmerized by the girl to do much of anything. The girl, she gave me a look that could have iced over Hell itself, then she kind of straightened her blouse and limped out of the room. No one said a word."

"What do you think of it, Lieutenant?" It was Mark who spoke.

"I think officer Bones has just unwittingly given us the solution to the New-Year's-Eve murders." Cathy Carruthers' beautiful face was flushed with introspection. "And make no mistake, gentlemen, murder, it was."

"Which only goes to prove once again," Too Tall said, grinning at Mark, "that black is beautiful."

"Yeah," Mark was quick to respond, "and ignorance is bloody bliss." To the Lieutenant, he said. "You mean you know who killed Weise and the girl?"

"I do. And not only *who*, Mark, but *how*!"

"I don't suppose you plan on filling us in, Lieutenant?"

"No time now, Bones. I want you to pick up your partner, Madson, and get out to the Weise/Dunlop place S.A.P. That means *Sirens And Power*. I want everyone assembled in that living room in twenty minutes. And, Bones, with the exception of Brenda Weise, I mean everybody."

THE SUN WAS HIGH OVERHEAD WHEN LIEUTENANT CATHY Carruthers stood once again in the center of the living room of the old tudor mansion. She looked around at the gathered family members and their retainers with a questioning mix of pathos and amusement.

Stanley Dunlop and his look-alike wife, Denise, sat together on an antiquated window seat, holding hands like a couple of children, and Marilyn Dunlop lolled lazily in the same chair she had occupied the day before when Sam Morton had taped her ankle. Gunga Din stood sullenly at the back of the room with Too Tall Bones close at his elbow. And hovering near the door to the hall, Elly McBain was shifting her weight restlessly from one foot to the other, as though listening for a summons from her dying patient on the second floor.

"All present and accounted for, Lieutenant," Mark reported from where he had positioned himself at the room's only egress. "Officer Madson is on the gate."

"Thank you, Mark." To the room at large, the Lieutenant said, "There is no easy way to inform a family group that one of its own is a murderer. You must all be aware by now, that the death of Hans Weise, and that of his daughter, Linda, was no accident. It was murder. Their untimely deaths were deliberately planned and executed by someone in this room. But before I reveal that person's identity —" Here she looked to the back of the room and leveled a meticulously manicured finger at the gatekeeper. "Bones, will you please cuff and restrain Gunther Dinsley."

The words had scarcely passed her lips when the *crr-lick* of the big black's cuffs echoed metallically through the room. Gunga Din loosed a low growl of displeasure.

"This unfortunate, dumb brute of a man was coerced into becoming an accessory to murder," the Lieutenant said with compassion, "but, in truth, he's more victim than villain." She flipped her own set of handcuffs from the belt at her waist, and turned to face Marilyn Dunlop.

"They won't be necessary," the blonde girl said with a deep sigh of resignation. "I know when I'm bloody licked."

"Then you're prepared to make a statement? To confess your part in

all this?"

"I didn't say that. I told you the cuffs weren't necessary, that's all. I don't intend to say or do a bloody thing."

"That's your privilege, Miss Dunlop, but it's my duty to inform you at this juncture, and you, Mr. Dinsley, that you have the right to remain silent — "

"*Can that crap!* I already know my bloody rights." The girl was flushed with anger and humiliation. "You don't have anything more to go on than a bloody theory, Lieutenant, you just can't prove a thing."

"But why, Lieutenant?" It was Stanley Dunlop who spoke. "Why on earth would Marilyn want to kill Hans and Linda? None of us like the man, but — "

"Money, Mr. Dunlop. Marilyn resented the intrusion of Hans and Linda into the Dunlop inheritance."

"But, Lieutenant, I have it on good authority that Hans and Linda would have received only a relatively small portion of the total bequest. Enough for them to continue living in modest comfort, plus a provisional amount held in trust for Linda's education — "

"Yes, Mr. Dunlop. We, too, assumed that such would be the case, as did Miss Dunlop. But what she realized, and you may not have, is that a will can be contested. With his status as legal spouse, and the only surviving parent of their natural daughter (with all the emotional implications a pretty five year-old girl could wring from a sympathetic court), Weise could have, and, I'm sure, *would* have, built himself a very credible case."

Stanley Dunlop exchanged a wide-eyed look with his nubile little wife. The Lieutenant wondered, with some amusement, if the long-beleaguered groom could see TILT flashing in those innocent azure eyes.

"Hogwash!" Marilyn Dunlop slumped a little deeper in her chair. "Besides, I can't recall anyone ever going to jail just for — thinking about it."

"Which is fortunate for you, Miss Dunlop," the Lieutenant replied, "or we'd be trying you on four counts of murder, instead of two."

Denise Dunlop permitted her pretty jaw to drop and the flashing TILT suddenly gave way to GAME OVER. "Oh my God, Stanley, she was going to kill us!"

"How can you know that, Lieutenant?" Stanley Dunlop choked, "how can you possibly *know* that?"

"Murder, like love, Mr. Dunlop, is always easier the second time around. And your sister felt she had the perfect means of disposing of the remaining heavy spenders. She wanted it all, you see, and she

meant to get it. By simple attrition."

"How was she going to — to — ?" Denise Dunlop was a question mark beautifully, fearfully personified.

"It was really quite simple." Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers stood tall and statuesque in the center of the room, her long yellow hair glistening like freshly spun flax. Mark, from where he stood at the doorway, marveled at the poise and the beauty of this outrageously stunning woman. The time of revelation was at hand and the Amazon, he knew, was going to make the most of it.

"Now, if you will permit me," she said as she addressed the motley gathering, "I will endeavor to elucidate." She touched the tip of her tongue to her swollen lip. "Hans Weise, and little Linda, died on New Year's Eve of suffocation, or, to put it another way, they died from a sustained lack of oxygen — which, you understand, is the same thing in one sense, but vastly different in another.

"However, in view of the serenely composed state of the bodies, plus the total absence of any signs of violence, I immediately discounted suffocation, per se, which would have necessitated a strong hand or a gag over the mouth, or a pillow over the head, or whatever. Instead, I thought it more likely that the air supply itself had been tampered with. But how? How to account for the fact that two of three people in the same room died, while the other remained alive?

"Our first thoughts, of course, were of CO (carbon monoxide), a frequent killer in these modern times. But had there been sufficient carbon monoxide in that bedroom to have killed Hans Weise and Linda, Mrs. Weise would also have died. No. It had to be some form of gas, I reasoned, that had its own barrier — built-in, so to speak."

THE AMAZON PERCHED HER ENGAGING RUMP ON THE EDGE of a table and crossed her long silken legs. The move was monitored by every eye in the room, including those belonging to Stanley Dunlop. A petulant dig in the ribs from his ever-lovin' abruptly ended whatever reveries he might have momentarily enjoyed.

"In his report to me this morning," the Amazon continued, "officer Bones unwittingly made reference to something that (in his words) "could have iced over Hell itself." And that was the precise moment, ladies and gentlemen, when all the scattered pieces of the puzzle came tumbling into place."

"Do bloody tell," Marilyn Dunlop muttered sourly.

"The gas you used, Miss Dunlop, was CO₂," the Amazon went on, undeterred, "carbon dioxide, which, when cooled sufficiently, becomes an easy-to-handle solid. *Dry Ice*, in other words. We're all

familiar with it. And while the gas itself is not poisonous, a sustained dose of it can cut off the body's supply of oxygen. Mrs. Weise was not affected (other than being awakened by the resulting chill in the room) because CO₂, being heavier than air, sinks to the lowest level. The barrier between the two on the floor and the dying woman in the bed, was simple gravity."

"But there must have been some trace — "

"Carbon dioxide is colorless and odorless as it evaporates from its Dry Ice form," the Lieutenant told an astounded Stanley Dunlop. "The only trace was a small alcohol stain by the window. Alcohol, you see, is frequently used in the manufacture of Dry Ice, as a control agent. The alcohol would be, and was, its only residue."

"Miss Dunlop, we know, had access to any amount of the coolant at M.R. & P., where she worked." The Lieutenant regained her feet as she continued. "And while she could easily have put a block of the stuff in the sick room herself, there was a genuine risk of her being seen by some other member of the household. And so, to be on the safe side, she enlisted the services of Mr. Dinsley. She persuaded the poor dupe to scale the old elm to the balcony, with a block of Dry Ice clutched in his great paws. Once there, he simply opened the window (inadvertantly leaving his fingerprints on the outside pane) and obediently placed the block of ice on the floor, just inside the window. He then closed the window and descended the way he had come."

Stanley Dunlop looked around at an abject Gunga Din, standing with his head on his chest, under the watchful eye of Too Tall bones. "But what, Lieutenant, could persuade even a dumb brute like Gunga Din to be a party to cold-blooded murder?"

Marilyn Dunlop struggled to her one good foot and turned to face the Amazon with her wrists extended. "Cathy," she said meekly, "is the rest of it really necessary?"

"No," the Amazon replied. "Not if you're prepared now to make a statement."

The blonde girl raised her eyes and met the Amazon's searching gaze. Then, as the cuffs closed snugly over her wrists, she said in a low voice that only her captor could hear, "Will — will he be all right?"

"Gunga Din? I expect so."

"He was just like a — a kind of pet," the girl mused aloud, "a big dog, like a Great Dane or a St. Bernard. He'd do anything for me, you know."

"Yes, I know," the Amazon said dryly. "Even to murder." ●

Was it voodoo, or was it a plain case of murder? One thing was certain: what was supposed to be a romantic honeymoon was quickly turning into a deadly one!

Terror Key

by MIKE TAYLOR

AT THREE O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON ON A COLD, BLUSTERY November 1st, 1936, Elizabeth Ann Wainwright became my wife.

It was during a brief civil ceremony at the municipal courthouse overlooking the Hudson. Walt Morrell was my best man, Fanny Ellsworth was Elizabeth's bridesmaid, Ted Tinsley and Fred Davis were the witnesses. When it was over everyone kissed the bride, pumped my hand, then hustled us into a cab for Grand Central Station.

That evening we were aboard the Silver Phantom, bound for a two-week honeymoon in the sunny climes of Florida. Our private compartment was a perfect love-nest for the two-day journey. Except for grudging trips to the dining car we remained secluded, only remotely aware of the changing landscape sliding by outside.

That we were on our way to a tropical honeymoon was the purest stroke of luck — originally we had planned nothing more exotic than a week in the Maine Woods. My means were limited and, although Elizabeth had a small monthly income in addition to her writing, we had committed most of our funds toward finding a suitable place to live.

Then, only a few weeks before the wedding, while we were having dinner at Bordelon's, good fortune appeared in the form of Jonas Wilder. Jonas was an old-time pulpster made good, one of the favored few who had survived the suffocating flood of words, words, words,

and actually gone on to write books. As an assistant editor he had been largely responsible for bringing the Munsey chain into prominence during the second decade. Later he had found a niche with a Manhattan publisher who religiously released one of his books a year. A couple of them had excited critics to the point where they hailed him as "the new Booth Tarkington." He was successful enough that, in spite of the hard times, he had recently purchased his own little island off the Florida gulf coast.

Now in his sixties and semi-retired, Jonas hadn't severed all his ties with the pulp world. Whenever he was in town he attended the Guild luncheons. Perhaps because of a shared taste for the irreverent we had hit it off immediately. When Elizabeth and I bumped into him in the restaurant, and he met my charming bride-to-be, Jonas quickly invited us to spend some time at his new home.

"You'll love it! Big rambling old villa on a square mile of key, nobody there but two Jamaican servants, a caretaker, and myself. You couldn't ask for a more private place. C'mon. Get out of this miserable weather. Make an old man happy. I enjoy showing off my island."

After some initial hesitation, we accepted. It was the chance of a lifetime and, with a place to stay, our vacation money would more than cover the cost of train tickets and a little entertainment. And so it happened that, little more than forty-eight hours after the wedding, under a bright tropical moon, we arrived at Terrapin Key.

JONAS HAD FAILED TO MENTION JUST HOW ISOLATED IT WAS. From St. Petersberg we caught a local train down the coast to Naples. Jonas had a man waiting for us at the station. Ten miles of shell roads in a rusty Model A, then we were transferred to another local with a small motor launch who floated us out into the tortuous waterways of the Ten Thousand Islands. For over an hour we threaded a path through the maze of tiny coral keys choked with vegetation.

The boatman, Fred Harley, was a shrunken, sun-wrinkled old sailor, fully as reticent as any New Englander toward strangers. He strayed from his nods and grunts only once, to mutter to no one in particular: "Cain't figure why anybody'd wanna spend their honeymoon on Terror Key."

I squinted at him in the dying twilight. "You mean Terrapin Key, don't you? Jonas Wilder's place?"

"Yep." He arced a stream of tobacco juice over the side. "Folks around these parts call it different, with good cause I'd say."

And that was all we could get out of him.

THE MOON WAS RISING AS THE LAUNCH CLEARED A NARROW channel and we sighted Terrapin Key. It rose out of the black water like a great turtle, its back mossy with mangroves, palms and dense under-growth. The top of the hump had been sheared off and the villa rested there, walls gleaming bone-white against the dark backdrop of foliage. We tied up beside an old skiff at a small pier jutting out into the shallows.

As we climbed out our cheery guide piled the luggage on the pier and, with a parting grunt, putted away.

"Well," Elizabeth sighed, brushing back an errant strand of hair. "Welcome to paradise, darling."

She looked so lovely in her rumpled white linen traveling suit and panama hat that I drew her into my arms and stole a kiss while the moon looked on. And Jonas too, apparently, for we were interrupted by a polite cough from the shore.

"Bill! Elizabeth! Good to see you. Congratulations!"

As he stepped onto the planks I barely managed to hide my shock. In contrast to the robust figure I knew, Jonas looked to be at death's door. He had undergone a monstrous transformation in the few weeks since we had last seen him in New York. His snow-white hair had thinned so visibly that pink scalp showed through. He appeared shrunken and moved with noticeable difficulty. His hand when I shook it was frail and unpleasantly dry to the touch. He embraced Elizabeth only briefly, as if aware of the startling impact he made.

"Jonas, what's happened? You look — well — awful," I said with my characteristic lack of tact.

He laughed harshly. "You might well wonder. It's a hell of a story. Let's get you kids settled and we'll talk about it over a planter's punch."

A black couple in colorful garb materialized, toted our bags to shore, and stacked them on a small handcart. We followed them up a winding path to the villa, through a carefully tended profusion of citrus trees and hibiscus. Even the gradual incline taxed Jonas; I slipped an arm through his during the climb.

THE BUILDING WAS A SPRAWLING ONE-STORY, CLOSE TO A hundred feet long. It was surrounded by an acre of gardens with shell walkways cris-crossing through a variety of flowers and shrubs. At the Roman entrance Jonas paused while the servants went on with our belongings.

"There are, I'm afraid, other guests which I didn't anticipate at the time I invited you. You'll meet them in awhile." His voice was an

unpleasant, wheezy rasp. "However, I've saved the master suite for you. It's next to my own quarters in the south wing. Three rooms, a patio and separate steps to a path leading down to a small cove on the other side of the key. That should be private enough. Now, please make yourselves at home. When you've rested a bit and freshened up Sarah will show you to the courtyard for a late supper."

The servants, Sarah and William, helped us unpack in the spacious bedchamber, then departed. We relaxed for the next hour or so — well, sort of — until Sarah came to take us to supper. We had both refrained from talking much about Jonas' condition, but now the prospect of seeing him again acted as a damper on our spirits.

"What could have happened?" Elizabeth whispered as we followed Sarah into the spacious inner courtyard. A flagstone floor admitted several small palms at regular intervals. Gathered under them, cafe-style, were wrought-iron tables and chairs. Some of them were occupied.

"I don't know," I murmured. "The suddenness of it is what scares me."

The object of our concern came forward to greet us, determinedly hearty, looking shrunken in a white plantation jacket. "Hi kids. Is everything okay? Good. Come along; I want you to meet the rest of the household."

There were five people seated at the tables; all regarded us, I thought, with some degree of hostility as we were introduced.

Carl and Elise Wilder, Jonas' nephew and his wife, were the youngest of the group. Carl was a short, dark, handsome man, immaculate mustache and brilliantined hair. Elise was slight, nervous, very pale, with the largest green eyes I had ever seen.

Thornton Boggs I knew by reputation. He was one of the mainstays of *Weird Tales*, a Chicago-based writer of grim, brooding horror stories that belied his cherubic, Teddy Roosevelt appearance. He was part of that select inner circle which included Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Long and young Bob Howard, who had died so tragically by his own hand a few months earlier.

The other woman present was Naomi Harter, formerly Wilder, Jonas' ex-wife. She was a striking brunette, obviously approaching middle age, but battling it with every means at her command. Her voice was throaty and she kept my hand long enough to draw a sharp glance from Elizabeth.

The last of the fivesome was Milos Farnum, who, we were told, served as the island's caretaker. He was a rugged-looking, taciturn fellow who could have been a close relation to our erstwhile boatman.

AFTER THE INTRODUCTIONS JONAS DREW US OVER TO A portable bar, attended by William, and spoke quietly while the planter's punches were being built.

"This mob descended on us nearly a month ago — just after I returned from New York, in fact. They're all broke apparently; Carl's mining company failed, Naomi wants more alimony, and Thornton's your typical starving writer. Now I think they're all waiting around to see how sick I am, hoping for something in the will." He started to chuckle and coughed sharply.

Elizabeth put her hand on his arm. "Seriously, Jonas, what's wrong? You looked so well the last time we saw you."

He looked at us strangely. "You're not going to believe this. Hell, I can hardly believe it myself. It seems I'm under a voodoo curse."

"What?" I cried. "C'mon, Jonas, you're the hard-headedest man I know. You don't believe much like that."

He shrugged. "I didn't. But now . . . look, everyone's staring. Let's join the others. I'll tell you all about it later."

They were a peculiar bunch. Carl and Elise were a sullen couple, seemingly suspicious of our relationship with Jonas.

"I understand you're both writers," she commented during the meal. "Such an *uncertain* profession. I do hope you have more permanent plans for the future."

I said we didn't, that we were both happy with our work.

Carl said, "Then you're certainly lucky to have Jonas for a patron. He's helped many a struggling writer, haven't you, Uncle?"

I didn't know where that was leading, but then Thornton Boggs jumped in. "A little respect for your uncle would not be unseemly, young man. Jonas Wilder is a generous soul. He has helped many writers, myself included, when the checks were late." He turned to me. "I've read some of your work, Mr. Bryant. Shows promise, especially that magazine *The Wraith*, which I understand you ghost. Say, didn't I read about some sort of scandal in the *Times* back last summer?"

Elizabeth looked at me helplessly. Her uncle's madness was still a bitterly painful subject with her. But it seemed Jonas wasn't off the hook yet. Before I could respond, Naomi Harter chimed in with rather strident tones.

"Let's not forget all the struggling young actresses my former husband has also aided. Jonas helps Jonas; if anyone else happens to benefit, that's incidental."

Jonas glared at her and half rose. Suddenly a fit of coughing seized him and his face grew red. William appeared at his elbow and had to

help him from the courtyard.

"You all seem to be enjoying his hospitality," Elizabeth said quietly into the uneasy silence that followed, "as are we."

She said no more but the rebuke was plain. I was proud of her.

"Aye, ye pack a bleedin' parasites," spoke up Farnum, the caretaker. "Hoverin' around here waitin' for the boss to sicken and die. It were better you all left him in peace."

After that the conversation deteriorated into a bleak exchange of accusations and denials. We left as quickly as possible.

LATER IN THE EVENING WILLIAM CAME BY WITH WORD THAT
Jonas wanted to see us. His rooms were down the hall, on the opposite side from ours. Propped up by a mound of pillows in a huge bed, he looked old and weak. But his voice was strong enough as he beckoned us to pull up chairs.

"Delightful little scene at supper, wasn't it? I'm sorry you kids had to see this. It's probably a poor setting for a honeymoon and if you wanted to leave I certainly wouldn't blame you."

"Nonsense," I said. "We haven't even seen your island yet. Forget about the unhappy relations. I want to hear about the cause of your illness. Voodoo?"

"All right. But grab your gallouses, this is a dilly. This place had been vacant for some time before I bought it. When we came down to open it up last Fall there was a bunch of squatters here — half a dozen Haitians. They had moved into the villa and made themselves right at home. When Milos and I chased them out they went into the mangroves. There was a lot of yelling and some threats and one fellow, an old geezer named Belalo, called down a curse on me. Needless to say, I thought nothing of it, forgot all about it, in fact.

"Then one night after we'd moved in I walked into this room and here's what looks like a pile of white feathers in the middle of my bed. It was a chicken leg, severed at the joint, tied with a black ribbon. A voodoo fetish, Sarah informed me later. I tossed it out the window and went to bed. The next night the drums started. And a few days after that I started having stomach pains and dizziness. I still didn't make any connection.

"The following week all my company started to arrive. It was pretty hectic and I wasn't feeling too well besides. The attacks grew worse. One night I woke from a nightmare in a cold sweat. This was lying on the sheets beside me."

He reached into the top drawer of a nightstand and brought out an object about eight inches long. Though the workmanship was crude,

the tiny waxen figure was clearly a likeness of Jonas. Thrust completely through the middle was a shiny silver knitting needle.

I took it from him gingerly, turned it over and over. The eyes were tiny chips of agate, the hair might have been a lock of his own.

"Ugh!" Elizabeth shuddered against me. "How grotesque!"

"Why not pull the needle out?" I asked, already accepting what was implied: that this little caricature was somehow responsible for his misery.

"I'm told by Sarah and William that to remove it would mean certain death," Jonas said quietly. "Of course if this is all so much bunk, that's ridiculous. But if it's not . . . well, I just don't know anymore. Would you pull it out?"

Tough question. Of course voodoo was superstitious nonsense; it couldn't really harm anyone. And yet —

"If you've any doubts, leave it in," Elizabeth said firmly. "Jonas, have you seen a doctor?"

"Twice, my dear. He muttered something about a possible stomach cancer, but the tests were inconclusive. Now, not a word of this to the rest of those vultures. Promise?"

We promised.

"If you'll forgive me, all this chit-chat has tired me out. Don't worry about me; I'm a tough old bird. I want you to try and enjoy your stay. Until tomorrow, then."

THE PURPLE TROPIC DUSK WAS HEADY WITH NATURE'S perfume; quite a change from the icy New York winter. It was our second night on Terrapin Key. We sat on the small patio outside our bedroom, holding hands, listening to a background ensemble made up of night insects and the barely audible strains of Latin music from a Havana radio station.

The day had gone well. Jonas seemed in better spirits — though he was very weak and could scarcely eat — and the endless sniping of his dubious assortment of guests seemed to abate somewhat under a brilliant sun and fresh southwesterly breeze.

That morning we had toured the small key, marveling at the profusion of lush tropical growth and wild birds. The impenetrable mangrove swamps at each end of the island made a brooding counterpoint to the cheerful atmosphere. The small oceanside cove was perfect, a crescent of white sand beach and limpid blue water, sheltered by twin arms of green jungle. After lunch there was tennis and a dip in the ocean. All this was pretty heady stuff to a kid from Missouri.

Now, as a swollen moon rode up the sky, we shared desultory

conversation about the odd situation in which we found ourselves.

"I'm afraid Mr. Boggs is a bit of a masher," Elizabeth said matter-of-factly. "He made a grab for me in the courtyard today."

"That bastard! Want me to punch him out?"

"Not necessary, darling. I mentioned to him that if he laid a hand on me again I'd render him incapable of ever having children. I think he got the message."

"Shy, demure lady. This really is a strange group. I was coming through the garden this evening and ran up on Carl and the former Mrs. Jonas Wilder. They were in the midst of a terrific clinch."

"Tsk, tsk. But Carl's wife is such a surly type. I hear her bawling out the caretaker — Milos, is it? — out by the tool shed. Something about the condition of the pier. You'd have thought this was her place."

"Maybe she hopes it will be. Considering the state of Jonas' health, I wonder how his will does read."

"Bill, what about this voodoo business?"

"I don't know if such a thing is possible. Something's eating on Jonas, that's for sure."

As though in consonance with my musings a low, ominous, thrumming noise rippled across the night air, paused, then repeated. Drums! The sounds seemed to be coming from the depths of the mangrove swamp to our left. Eerie, threatening, the drums boomed out their message, gradually rising to a sinister crescendo that drowned out the radio and made the blood pulse quicker.

We stared at one another as shivery sensations turned the night blacker and the shadows deeper. The moon slipped behind a cloud and even the insects ceased their reassuring chatter.

"Suddenly that little doll doesn't seem so farfetched," Elizabeth murmured.

"Ummm. It makes your skin crawl, all right. Let's go inside. The evening has somehow lost its charm."

The drums continued for another forty-five minutes or so, then fell silent. Gradually life returned to the night and we went rather gratefully to bed and, eventually, to sleep:

I, WHO CAN SLEEP UNDISTURBED THROUGH A THUNDER-storm, awakened violently sometime later. I rose on an elbow, scanning the room. The Westclox on the nightstand showed two a.m. Moonlight splashed in through the French windows. Elizabeth was snoring gently beside me.

The sound which must have awakened me came again: the muted scrape of someone — *something*? — moving outside on the patio. I

climbed out of bed, slipped into my robe, padded quietly to the double doors. Opened one ever so carefully and peered out into the clotted shadows.

Nothing right. Nothing left — wait! Was that a figure near the far end of the building, moving away from me? I eased out the door, let it swing silently closed. The tiles were cool on my bare feet. Moving ever so carefully, I followed the dimly seen shape, heart banging noisily in my chest.

It glided along the wall, reached the corner, and disappeared. Jonas' bedroom, I recalled, was just on the opposite side of the wing. I speeded up, reached the corner, rounded it — and ran smack into whatever I was following. I had fleeting impressions of a bizarrely shapen head, a strong, somehow familiar smell, a strange rustling sound. Then something very hard exploded against the top of my head and I fell into darkness.

THERE WAS BLOOD EVERYWHERE.

I stood in the doorway of Jonas' room, holding my painfully throbbing head, staring at the mess. I was among the last to arrive. Apparently quite a racket had been raised.

Elizabeth ran to me, grabbed me fiercely. "Bill! What happened? Where *were* you?"

"Later," I muttered. "God! What a mess!"

The walls, the floor, the bed, even the ceiling was splattered red. Some of it might have been designs. I pushed through the clump of onlookers, searching for Jonas. He lay supine on the rug alongside the bed, his robe crimson with blood. Naomi knelt at his side.

As I crossed the room he sat up and said, "Bloody hell!"

"Jonas! Are you all right?"

He chuckled weakly. "I'll survive. Idiots! Bastards!"

"You're not even hurt!" Naomi cried. "What in the world happened?"

"Two men wearing hoods," he grunted as I helped him to the edge of the bed. "They came in through the French windows. Buckets of animal blood, I guess. They drenched the place, including me. One of them slugged me when I went for him."

"But why?" Carl interjected as William and Sarah entered the room, closely followed by Milos. "What's the meaning of all this?"

I picked up an object lying on the rug. It appeared to be a tiny, shrunken, black hand.

There was a chorus of "ooohs" and gasps. "It's a child's hand," Elise moaned. "Voodoo!" Sarah whispered and crossed herself.

Thornton Boggs stepped forward, held out his hand. "May I?"

I dropped it onto his palm. He turned it over several times, examining it closely, then gave a victorious snort. "Monkey paw."

More exclamations of wonder. "Isn't it just awful?" Elise gave an exaggerated shiver.

"Bizarre is more like it," I said. "Boggs, you seem to be familiar with this. What's the significance of the blood and the paw?"

He shrugged deprecatingly. "I once did a story about voodoo for *Strange Tales*. It's a catch-all religion for every superstition in the western hemisphere. I believe the blood is a cleansing ritual linked to the destruction of an enemy. The monkey paw is a powerful talisman, used to invoke supernatural powers. It was probably dropped by accident."

"Whatever. Now you all know what's going on. Weird as it may seem, somebody's after Jonas, using voodoo as a weapon. He can't be left alone. We need to take turns staying with him until this mess is straightened out."

"I'll volunteer for the rest of tonight," Naomi said archly. "After all, I've had some experience."

Jonas said, "Harumph," but he didn't argue.

I grinned slightly. "Do you have a gun, Jonas?"

"I don't. Milos?"

"Aye. I've several pieces in my quarters, Mr. Bryant. What will you be needing?"

"Shotgun? Good. If you'll load it — buckshot — and bring it here. Naomi, keep it handy. I don't believe anything else will happen tonight. If something does, just point it and pull the trigger. Even if you don't hit anything, the noise and flash will scare the bejesus out of any intruder and bring us running."

We got Jonas relocated on a sofa in the sitting room. Milos arrived with the shotgun, a .12 gauge, and gradually everyone began drifting back to their beds. When Elizabeth and I left the two of them and returned to our rooms it was nearly four a.m.

I SAT ON THE EDGE OF THE BED AND TOLD HER WHAT I KNEW (not much) and what I thought (plenty) about all that had happened. My brain felt cottony but the adrenalin was still pumping. She held a cold washcloth to my forehead while I talked. When I was done she shook her head in disbelief.

"This is insane. I feel like we've stumbled into a bad novel. Voodoo, jealous relations, a lonely island . . . Darling, just think for a minute. What is the *point* of all this?"

I tried. "Well . . . obviously either to badly frighten Jonas, with all the voodoo psychology, or maybe even to kill him."

"And who is behind it? The Haitians that were ousted, according to Jonas. But outside of a pure revenge motive, what do they gain? If he dies or leaves, someone else will end up with the villa. It seems to me the guests have much better reasons for wanting him dead. Money, which each of them obviously needs. Plus other squabbles we may know nothing about."

"We do need to ask Jonas about his will," I said slowly. Then, like a pinball dropping, something clicked into place. "There's one other explanation for these weird goings-on — they could be meant as a distraction."

"From what?"

"That's the tricky part. I really don't know. It was just a wild thought. Look, I'm starting to run down — let's sleep on it."

We slid under the covers and lay silently, holding hands. I was on the verge of dozing off when Elizabeth sat bolt upright.

"Arsenic!"

"Hunnnh?" My scalp began to prickly.

"It could be arsenic. The symptoms fit. Weakness, loss of hair, nausea . . . That doll's not killing Jonas; someone here in the villa is." She sank back into bed. "But who?"

BREAKFAST WAS A GLOOMY AFFAIR. EVERYONE SEEMED numbed by last night's events. The courtyard gathering was subdued, to say the least.

Also, the weather had soured. A tropical depression was moving up out of Yucatan, spreading rain and rough seas along the southwest coast. The marine radio broadcast frequent squall warnings and the skies were strangely opaque.

Earlier I had gotten Jonas aside and relayed our suspicions. He was at first shocked, then indignant.

"Who, in the name of hell?"

"I don't know. Jonas, who stands to gain if you die?"

He thought a minute. "Everyone, I guess. I have no children. Naomi and Carl would share the bulk of the estate. Thornton would get out from under the rather considerable debt he owes me. There's a small sum to be divided among Milos and Sarah and William."

"Do any of them know this?"

"I suppose they all do, except maybe the servants. I've never made a secret of it."

"Swell. That makes everyone suspect. Well, from now on you're

going to eat only what Elizabeth or I have personally prepared. Arsenic is a cumulative poison. It gradually weakens the victim until the actual cause of death can be natural. A couple of days should prove whether or not voodoo is responsible for your illness or is just the smokescreen for a cowardly murderer."

Jonas shook his head. "You think one of them may be staging the voodoo stuff too?"

"It's possible. Maybe even in cahoots with the Haitians out in the swamps. But don't say anything right now — let's carry on like nothing's changed and see how everyone reacts."

He sighed. "Okay. But I feel so damned foolish — and helpless . . ."

NOW, AT BREAKFAST, ELIZABETH WAS PLAYING DETECTIVE, asking casual questions about the household routine, trying to learn who, besides Sarah and William, would have had the opportunity to doctor Jonas' food. Everyone was present except Naomi. After sitting up with Jonas all night she had apparently retired to her room.

Milos, sitting next to me, also looked weary. His eyes were red-rimmed and I thought I caught a whiff of rum. He peered at the bleak sky. "Rough weather comin' sure. Be here by tonight."

"How long have you worked for Jonas?" I asked offhandedly.

"Why you might say I came with the furniture. I worked for the last owner, Mr. Thatcher. I closed her up when he died last year and was up in St. Pete when Mr. Wilder bought the place."

"Did you see the Haitians?"

"Aye. Scurvy lot. We chased 'em off without much difficulty though. Figure they may've been raisin' some of the hell that gave this key its nickname. Didn't think they'd stay long in the mangroves. Then this voodoo business started. Reckon they were madder than I thought."

"Could that be responsible for Jonas' illness?"

A judicious shrug. "Hard to say. I've seen some funny things in these parts — voodoo's not the strangest of 'em." He waved a hand. "This bunch now: wouldn't trust the lot. If it were me — "

He was cut off as Sarah came rushing into the courtyard. "Mr. Jonas! Mr. Farnum! William say you come down to the cove, most quickly."

There was a flurry of questions but Sarah was too agitated to do more than repeat, "The cove! Quickly! Quickly!" So very shortly all of us were filing down the twisting path behind the villa, Milos and I helping Jonas.

As we reached the beach, William stood up from the dark, crumpled object he had obviously pulled from the sea. His mouth was a round O

of shock as he gesticulated wildly.

"I come down to gather crabs for dinner," he cried. "Lady in the water, not moving, not breathing."

I knelt beside the body. Naomi Harter appeared smaller in death, her body shrunken in a sodden black dressing gown, face pinched white by the water. I couldn't tell if she had drowned or died before going into the ocean, but one thing was certain: the stakes had just been raised horribly in the grim game being played out on Terror Key.

THE DAY PASSED IN A TURMOIL OF ACTIVITY.

Naomi's body was wrapped in a tarp and placed in the ice-house. Milos, Carl and I, armed with rifles and the shotgun Naomi had unfortunately left behind, made two abortive attempts to penetrate the mangrove swamps in search of the Haitians. We were lucky to make a hundred yards each time. The undergrowth was impassible.

For a time there was a lot of congregating, little knots of people all babbling in nervous speculation. Everyone's mind was on two fearsome possibilities: one, that we were under siege by a mob of crazed Haitians; two, that someone in our midst was a murderer. There was no question of Naomi's death being an accident, although by now I was fairly certain that, technically, she had drowned — it's tough to swim with a broken neck.

There were other ominous developments. One of our first decisions had been to send William to the mainland to fetch the local law. However, he returned from the pier after a few minutes to inform us that the skiff was missing.

That left the wireless set in the villa — need I tell you that several tubes were gone from the transmitter? Whoever was responsible for Naomi's death was determined that no word of it would leave the key. But what, I asked myself, was the point of that? Unless he intended to murder us all, an investigation of the killing was inevitable. Of course, if the object was to delay . . . I recalled my earlier hunch that the voodoo business was all intended as a distraction. Now it had gone beyond that.

On top of everything else the weather was becoming nastier by the hour. As the depression approached, the strength of the squalls intensified. By late afternoon steady rain fell from a low leaden sky between storms. Craft warnings were up and the marine broadcaster was predicting 40-knot gusts by midnight.

If breakfast had been gloomy, dinner that evening was downright disasterous. Because of the rain it was moved inside to the formal dining room. Suspicion and fear swirled like visible clouds around the

chandeliers.

"Poor, poor Naomi," Elise said for perhaps the tenth time. "What a tragic waste."

Carl glared at her, no doubt more bereft than she, judging by what I had witnessed in the gardens.

Jonas, who was eating a chop which Elizabeth had broiled, said quietly, "Please be quiet." The loss of his former wife had shaken him considerably. I gathered that theirs had been a volatile relationship, a love-hate affair with little middle ground.

Thornton Boggs said, "By God, this is incredible. We're virtual prisoners in here while a group of madmen roams around the island. There must be a way to the mainland."

"Not till the weather improves," I said. "Then if the skiff doesn't turn up we can jury-rig a raft of some kind. Meantime we're stuck."

Milos grinned through his mustache. "S a fact. We don't want anything else like happened to the missus, so I reckon everybody should stay close inside tonight and ride out this storm. Clearing weather by tomorrow afternoon's my guess."

Conversation during the rest of the meal was devoted to furious speculation on the hows and whys of Naomi's death. The spoken consensus was that she had stumbled onto the Haitians, up to some deviltry, and they had silenced her. Beyond that, however, I knew that everyone harbored doubts about their fellow-diners as well, Elizabeth and me included. It was not a pleasant time.

AFTERWARDS WE SAT A WHILE WITH JONAS, SIPPING A brandy, watching the rain lash against the windows. The rest of the party had scattered.

"How are you feeling, Jonas?" Elizabeth asked.

He confided to us, a trifle sheepishly, that earlier in the day he had summoned up his courage and yanked the needle out of the tiny waxy figure. No ill effects. Nothing.

"Damn nonsense. I should have my head examined for swallowing such trash. When I find out who's behind this . . ."

It was just past nine o'clock when we saw the light. Out in the murky night, a pale gleam leaping on the water, appearing and fading like a will-o-the-wisp. We watched it, mesmerized.

"It's a boat!" Elizabeth cried finally. "And it's coming closer."

"The cove," Jonas said. "He's making for the shelter of the cove."

All the disparate questions and hunches that had been bouncing around loose in my head suddenly coalesced. "I'm going down there. I think that's where I'll find Naomi's murderer and your tormentor,

Jonas."

"Not without me," Elizabeth said, getting a solid grip on my sleeve. "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

"Be careful, you two."

We stopped for slickers and boots. I wanted to get a weapon from Milos' arsenal, but we couldn't locate him and his quarters were locked up tight.

"I hate to go out there without a gun," I said doubtfully.

"Just a minute." Elizabeth ran down the hall to our rooms. She returned carrying, of all things, a tiny, silverplated automatic. "Here, darling. I've been carrying it since last Spring. I'm afraid I've never fired it."

I took the gun, checked the load, jammed it into an inside pocket. A .22, five shots. I'd never fired one either. "Let's go."

OUTSIDE, IT WAS FOUL. STRONG GUSTS OF WIND DROVE THE rain in all directions. In spite of the raingear we were soaked in minutes. The path down to the cove was slick and treacherous. As we neared the bottom it became possible to make out some of what was going on.

The light was at the bow of a small whale boat, now anchored in the lee near the far wall. Several men were busy unloading bulky crates, splashing through the shallows created by the outgoing tide.

What had not been apparent earlier, at high water, was the black cleft in the sheer face, into which the crate bearers were now filing.

"Let's get closer," I said.

We reached the beach and moved off to the left, hugging the black line of undergrowth at the foot of the embankment. We crept to within twenty-five yards of the activity and crouched down, watching the unloading process as the storm raged on.

Elizabeth clutched my arm. "Smugglers?"

"Yeah. That has to be it. It explains the voodoo business — whoever's in charge first wanted to scare Jonas away, if possible, not kill him. That would have left their operation intact. Those guys are probably the elusive Haitians, but the ringleader has to be — "

The gunshot cracked like a whip, somewhere behind us. Wet sand splattered the side of my face, half-blinding me.

"Stand, ye meddlers!" The harsh, familiar voice boomed through the night. "Hands above the head now."

A moment later I felt the cold poke of twin shotgun barrels against the back of my neck. "It's real pests you two have become," Milos Farnum said. "The rest of those greedy city slicks was easy enough to

fool, but you had to stumble onto the arsenic gimmick. Now you're down here nosin' into my business. Well. Since you're so curious, just march right on over to the cave. We'll give you a first-hand looksee."

He jabbed with the gun, snapping my head forward. Elizabeth gasped. We walked out into the roiling surf, following the shore around to the narrow slash in the face of the wall. Even in the poor light I could see by the high water mark that it would normally be submerged.

The Haitians saw us and cried to each other in a wild babble. Milos grunted something at them and herded us into the opening. We had to pass through in single file, Elizabeth first. Beyond was a good-sized space, illuminated by several kerosene lamps.

The bottom dropped off sharply, until we were waist-deep in churning water. A wide ledge ran along the back of the cave, well above the high tide mark. Once inside, the bottom rose gradually up to meet it. Off to the right was a small vortex of water, apparently a natural drain for the cave. I could feel the undertow as we crossed to the ledge.

It was piled high with crates and cartons. The stenciling on the sides told the whole story. Jamaican rum and Havana cigars. An ideal location for the transshipment of smuggled goods to the mainland.

"It really fouled up your operation when Jonas moved down here," I said as we climbed onto the ledge. "Your gang had to head for the swamps. And there was the constant threat of discovery. So you came up with the voodoo hoax. When the rest of the crowd started to arrive it must have seemed like a nightmare."

"Aye." Milos boosted himself up onto the ledge. The shotgun never wavered. " 'Twas a fine set-up we had here. Mr. Wilder by himself I could have handled. And the servants were too scared to be a problem. But when the rest of that mob showed — stand over there now, by the far edge. We'll want to keep this neat."

We moved along the ledge, halting directly above the whirlpool. Elizabeth came to me, burying her face against my chest. I stroked her hair, searching desperately for a way out of this.

"And Naomi?"

"Ah. Smart lady, that. She caught me in the kitchen a few days ago, sprinkling some of my special seasoning on the boss's chow. Suspected me from then on, I guess. This morning she put it up to me squarely — so I invited her down to the cove." His eyes grew strange. "She didn't die easy."

"The rum!" I groaned. "This place reeks of it. I smelled it on whoever coldcocked me last night. And on you this morning at breakfast. I didn't make the connection; I thought you were just tippling a few. Damn!"

All this chatter was not just hysteria. Shielded by her body, Elizabeth's hand had slipped inside my slicker and was searching for the little .22. I had to delay him a few more seconds.

"You can't keep on killing us off!" I yelled. I felt her hand close around the gun. "The law will swarm over this key like ants."

He nodded sadly and brought up the shotgun. "True enough. It's the end all right. We'll have to set up elsewhere. But there'll be no witnesses to spill our little game."

The dark openings in those barrels looked as big around as railroad tunnels. I started to swing Elizabeth around in a hopeless attempt to protect her.

Suddenly her hand was free of my clothing and the little gun blatted twice, in puny counterpoint to the echoing crash of Milos' shotgun. Buckshot stung the back of my left arm and shoulder. Elizabeth stumbled away from me, froze for one endless, horrible moment on the edge — then fell with a small shriek into the whirlpool.

I waited for the second blast to send me to join her. It didn't come. I turned, the world seeming to have shifted into slow motion. Milos was down, clutching at his face. Bright red blood welled between his fingers.

I ran to him, snatched up the shotgun, fired the second barrel over the heads of the astonished Haitian onlookers. They stampeded for the exit. It was the last I ever saw of them.

Ripping off my raingear, I plunged into the water, searching frantically for my wife. I sounded again and again, with no sign of her. At last exhaustion forced me to rest.

I was sitting on the ledge, head in my hands, when Carl and Thornton Boggs entered through the cleft. Jonas had grown worried and sent them after us. They had been on the path when they heard the gunfire and witnessed the exodus of the Haitians. Somewhat incoherently I explained what had happened.

For the next half-hour we hunted through every nook and angle of the cave. To no avail.

Elizabeth was gone.

NOTE: And here the narrative of my late uncle, William Lawrence Bryant, comes to an abrupt and unsatisfactory conclusion. The cause is as curious as some aspects of his short life: the last half-dozen pages of the faded black journal, used to record his experiences during the pulp publishing heyday of the mid-thirties, have been torn out! The ragged edges remain, mute confirmation that the story does not end here. The motive for their removal is a mystery, compounded by the

fact that research into marriage and death records, both in New York and Florida, has failed to provide any clue to either the existence or demise of an Elizabeth Ann Bryant, nee Wainwright.

I am aware the in some instances my uncle used fictitious names to conceal the identities of certain people. But why in this case? Besides the missing pages there is the question of other volumes. Apparently William Bryant's belongings were widely scattered after his death in North Africa during World War II. The cache I found contained this journal (published in three parts as "Death of a Pulpster," MSMM, Oct 80; "The Wraith and the Dove," MSMM, Aug 82, and the above) plus other personal items, but the bulk of the notes, manuscripts, published stories, etc., that a writer would normally accumulate are missing. Nor is there a single item — letter, photograph, jewelry — to indicate the existence of a wife.

It appears that the only hope of resolving this contradiction may lie with those few writers who have survived from that period. I solicit the help of anyone who has knowledge of the persons or events contained in this story. Unless someone comes forward with new information, the fate of Elizabeth Bryant must remain unknown. •

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He lunged with the oar again and this time he connected. A powerful blow sent a wave of pain crashing through my head. A second blow followed, but by that time I was already sinking under the water!

The Lights Across the Lake

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

AFTER THREE HOURS OF STEADY, EARLY MORNING DRIVING, I spotted the roadside mailbox with the name MARSTON printed on its side. This was my signal to turn off the main drag and follow a narrow dirt road into a dense forest. With sudden excitement, I steered my battered Dodge pickup along the winding path beneath a heavy canopy of foliage. In the bed of the truck, my ten foot aluminum boat and a nine horsepower motor rattled loudly.

As the pickup crept forward, bushes clawed at its sides and low hanging branches whipped at the windshield. Though I hadn't been here since the previous summer, it felt as if I'd traveled this route only a week before. Suddenly, the long months I'd recently spent undergoing rigorous training at the Police Academy seemed more a part of the past than last August's fishing trip.

I'd been following the road for half a mile when a bright patch of sunlight appeared up ahead, marking the end of the woods. As I drove closer, the square of light expanded, and I could make out the two cottages with Lake Mitchell glistening in the background. The road finally ended in a circular field which already contained a dew-speckled yellow sports car. I pulled up beside it and climbed out of the cab, feeling fully refreshed though it was barely eight o'clock and I'd just added a couple hundred miles to the odometer.

THE TWO COTTAGES LOOKED EXACTLY AS I REMEMBERED them — squat and gray with red roofs and screened windows. They

still needed fresh coats of paint. I walked over to the smaller cottage on the left where I'd spent a week the summer before and tried the door. It was locked. I turned to the neighboring cottage and rapped on the door. There was no answer.

Glancing through a window, I saw clothes scattered on the floor and newspapers crumpled on the couch. A portable typewriter surrounded by dishes and cups rested on the kitchen table. Obviously, someone was living there. The typewriter led me to believe that the occupant was Ken Alban, a writer who had rented the cottage for several weeks last summer.

I remembered Alban as a quiet man whose otherwise handsome face was marred by glasses with lenses as thick as the bottoms of Coke bottles. The year before, he'd been working on a suspense novel and claimed to find the lake setting relaxing and conducive to his writing. During the day, his typewriter had clattered constantly, but at night I'd occasionally spot him wading into the lake or sneaking past my cottage to visit Sue Marston while her husband was at work in the city. I had pretended to see nothing.

Reluctantly, I decided that I'd have to walk over to the Marston's house on the other side of my cottage and ask Sue for the key. My reservation had been made over five months before, and I was certain that they expected me.

Les and Sue Marston owned the house and two cottages on a few hundred yards of lake frontage. Lake Mitchell was a secluded and exclusive body of water, and property in the area sold at a premium. Sue lived at the lake house all summer while Les commuted from the city on weekends. But, from what I'd observed, she wasn't lonely while her husband was away.

Before getting the key, I decided to take a closer look at the lake. I tugged my shoes and socks off and wandered across the sandy beach toward the lapping shore. The sand was cool, but a ribbon of sparkling sunlight bisected the lake. Above, the sky was a clear blue with only a smattering of cirrus clouds. It promised to be a beautiful, warm day, and I was eager to try my new reel.

HALFWAY ACROSS THE BEACH, SOMETHING SHARP BIT painfully into the sole of my foot. Muttering a curse, I balanced myself on one leg and supported the hurt foot in my hand. A tiny pointed capsule of glass dangled from the wound. gingerly, I drew the object from my foot and examined it closely. It appeared to be one of those miniature Christmas tree lights. I squinted up toward the trees lining the beach and saw a string of the small bulbs draped from one tree to

the next as far down as I could see. I traced the cord back to my cottage where apparently it was plugged into an electric socket.

Shaking my head in bewilderment, I slipped the bulb into my pocket and continued across the beach. The water nibbled gently at the shore. Several yards out, the lake abruptly changed from an emerald green to a dark blue-gray where the bottom dropped off. Something seemed different from last year, but I couldn't place what it was. Then it struck me — the white raft which was anchored to the lake bed had been moved to a different location. Before, it had floated a short distance from the end of the dock, but now it was almost fifteen yards to the right of its original position.

As I moved along the water's edge, a flash of reflected sunlight caught my attention. A pair of glasses with extremely thick lenses lay at the foot of the dock. Figuring that Ken Alban must be nearby, I stepped over the glasses and made my way down the dock. The wooden slats creaked under my weight. In every direction, the lake was smooth and clear, and I was surprised to see several fist sized rocks strewn about the bottom. Last year, the swimming area had been immaculately free of debris of any sort. I walked to the end of the dock, enjoying the stillness of the morning, and gazed out at the lake. In the distance, a couple of fishing boats rode the calm water. The opposite shore was over three miles away, but, on a clear day like this, it was possible to see small trees and cottages dotting the coast.

At the end of the dock, the water was only five feet deep and so clear that you could see the rippled sand on the bottom. I was about to turn around and retrace my path to shore when a movement between the slats caught my eye. Leaning forward, I peered under the dock and nearly toppled into the lake at what I saw.

A man's body, wearing only white swim trunks, was somehow wedged between the metal poles and cables supporting the dock. He floated spread-eagled a few feet beneath the surface, and, as I watched, his head slowly swiveled in my direction. His wide eyes stared up at me from a blueish, slightly bloated face, and his mouth sagged open grotesquely. It was unmistakably Ken Alban.

I HADN'T BEEN A COP LONG ENOUGH TO SEE ANY DEAD bodies, and, as I wheeled and hurried down the dock, I found myself trembling. I strode across the beach and up the grassy incline toward the Marston's house. I took the front porch steps two at a time and knocked on the door. Standing there, I noticed a pair of damp swim trunks hanging over a lawn chair. Someone had recently been in the lake besides Ken Alban.

Les Marston opened the door and smiled through the screen. He was a tall, lean man with a dark complexion and black wavy hair turning gray at the temples. "Hello, Nat," he said cheerfully. "We've been expecting you."

I stepped into the house and saw Sue Marston seated at the kitchen table. She gave me a tight smile but said nothing. Sue was a shapely blonde in her mid-thirties. This morning her attractive face looked drawn and tired.

"You have a good drive up?" asked Marston. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

I drew in a deep breath, uncertain of how to break the news to them. "I just found Ken Alban's body under the dock," I said bluntly. "He's dead."

Sue Marston made a gagging sound and half stood up from the table. "Oh, God, no," she moaned, sagging back onto her chair.

Marston took a step backward. "Are you sure?" he asked, his face suddenly pale.

I nodded. "I remembered him from last year. You'd better call the police right away."

Les disappeared down a hallway, and I heard him dialing a phone. Sue had blanched to the color of chalk. She was crying, making soft, strangled sounds. I waited silently until Les returned.

"The sheriff will be here in a few minutes," he said, crossing over to his wife. He stood behind her and gently massaged her shoulders. "I can't remember the last time there's been a drowning in Lake Mitchell," he said. "This is terrible."

"Could Ken Alban swim well?" I asked.

"I don't think he could swim a stroke," Les replied, "but he loved to go for late night wades. He'd hammer away at his typewriter all day, then, at midnight or even later, you'd see him walking out into the lake. He'd wade out right up to his neck. I asked him about it, and he said that the water cleared his head and relaxed him. He claimed to get some of his best plot ideas out there in the water at night. But it always made me nervous as hell. He couldn't swim, and, without his glasses, he was as blind as a bat."

"I found his glasses on the dock," I said. "Did he always take them off when he went into the lake?"

"Yes," Sue said. She had stopped crying and was now struggling to regain her composure. She sniffled loudly from time to time.

"Did either of you see him in the lake last night?" My police training refused to let me keep quiet.

Marston shook his head. "Did you see Ken go in for his wade, Sue?"

he asked his wife. The tone of his voice sounded almost mocking.

Sue shook her head.

"Actually," Les said, "I was gone since seven o'clock last night and didn't get back until after one this morning. I usually stay at our house in the city during the week because it's close to my office, then drive up here on Friday night and stay until late Sunday afternoon. Last night, Sunday, I left for home as usual, but, once I got to the city, I wished that I'd stayed here at the lake. I was caught up with my work at the office, and I had plenty of vacation time coming to me. This last weekend, the weather's been beautiful up here, so I thought, What the hell! I drove back late last night — early this morning really. I surprised Sue and phoned the office this morning to tell them I wouldn't be in for a few days."

"Whose swim trunks are those on the porch?"

"Mine," Les answered. "I went for a quick dip last night when I got in. You might say that I was symbolically washing away the city." His brief smile reflected no humor.

"But you didn't see Alban?"

"Not a sign of him." Les shivered. "My God, he must have been already drowned when I was out there."

I was nervously jiggling the keys in my pocket, and my fingers touched the small Christmas tree light. I pulled it out and said, "I found this on the beach and noticed the lights strung from the trees."

"Oh, I forgot all about those things," Les said. "Last weekend was Sue's birthday, and we had a party on the beach. I strung the lights for a decoration. I'll have to remember to take them down."

"You moved the raft too," I commented.

"Yes. I moved it yesterday afternoon before I left for the city. I got tired of it being in the same spot for the last seven or eight years." Sue looked quizzically at her husband as he added wryly, "I wonder if the police around here are going to be as thorough as you are, Nat."

"Sorry," I said. "I guess I am getting a little carried away."

"Just proves you were well trained," Les observed. "But I hope to God that you don't think Sue or I had anything to do with Ken's drowning. He's been coming up here every summer for the last three years. We considered him more of a friend than a tenant."

Sue certainly did, I thought, and wondered if Les had any suspicions that his wife and Ken Alban were lovers. Had his surprise return the night before revealed more than he was letting on?

THERE WAS A LOUD RAP AT THE DOOR, AND ALL THREE OF US snapped our eyes in that direction. Through the screen, I saw a pair of

men dressed in khaki uniforms. "Sheriff Riley," announced one of the men.

Without leaving his wife, Les said, "Come on in, sheriff."

The two men entered the house and the shorter one said, "So we've got ourselves a case of drowning, do we?" He was well under six feet tall but solid and powerfully built. His sunburned face wore an expression bordering on belligerence. The tall skinny deputy behind him stood meekly without uttering a word.

"Nat here found Ken Alban's body," said Les.

"Who's this Alban?" asked the sheriff.

"The writer who's been renting from us these past few summers," Les explained.

"Oh, yeah, I've seen him in town a couple of times," said Sheriff Riley. "I roused old Phil and told him to bring the ambulance out here, but I told him to take his time. A drowned man isn't likely to go anyplace." The sheriff chuckled. "Good morning there, Sue. Guess I forgot my manners for a minute."

Sue stared at him coldly and made no reply.

"And who's this fella?" Sheriff Riley jerked his head in my direction.

"This is Nat Webster. He just came up this morning for a week of fishing. He found the body under the dock."

"Helluva way to start a vacation," commented the sheriff, shaking his head. "Now, no doubt this drowning was an accident, but until we get the coroner's report, I expect you'll all stick around."

"Sure," said Les, looking toward me. "This is upsetting, but you're still planning to stay for the week, aren't you, Nat?"

"Yes," I said.

"By the way, Sheriff, Nat's a policeman, too."

Sheriff Riley examined me with a new interest. "A big city cop, eh?"

"I just got out of the Academy," I said. "I can't really call myself a cop yet."

Sheriff Riley snickered. "That's right. You city boys have to go to a fancy school to learn how to be cops." The sarcasm in his voice was obvious. Abruptly, he turned to his deputy and barked, "Come on, Mike. Let's go take a look at that body." The deputy waited respectfully until Sheriff Riley had gone through the door before following him outside.

When they were gone, Les said, "Riley can be an abrasive sort of guy, but he does his job well. Why don't you go and settle into your cottage, Nat? No sense waiting around here when you could be out fishing. After all, that's what you came for."

I eagerly accepted Marston's suggestion. "I'll be in the cottage or out on the lake if the sheriff should want me for anything," I said.

"Sure thing." Still positioned behind Sue's chair, Les Marston watched me leave the house.

SHORTLY AFTER SEVEN THAT EVENING, I MOTORED MY BOAT from the middle of Lake Mitchell toward shore. It had been a fine day for fishing, and the splashing of the six bass in the pail sounded lovelier than any music. Behind me, the sun was slowly dipping toward the horizon, and the lake sparkled with the brilliance of crinkled tin foil. For a day that had begun so ominously, things had turned out well for me.

Still, all afternoon, I had felt uneasy about Ken Alban's drowning. At odd moments, I would suddenly recall the writer's puffy, discolored face, and my stomach would lurch at the image. If I found accidental death so disturbing, I wondered if maybe I wasn't cut out to be a cop. But the drowning nagged at the back of my mind. Something about it struck me as strange and out-of-place, and yet I could not put my finger on what it was.

As the boat puttered along, a twinkling in the trees on shore attracted me. The setting sun gleamed off of the Christmas lights which Les Marston had strung the week before. I wondered how they would look from the lake at night when they were lit.

When my boat reached shore, I tilted the motor, stepped into the water, and pulled the boat up onto the beach. Feeling tired and hungry, I was eager to fry a couple of the fish I'd caught and open a beer.

AN HOUR LATER, CONTENTED AND FULL, I WAS RELAXING ON a lounge chair on the beach, sipping a cold beer, and watching the last of the sun disappearing over the horizon. My thoughts drifted aimlessly. The lake was beautiful, but as Ken Alban had discovered, it could be treacherous to the careless. I glanced over at the dock and shivered. Then, gradually, the tranquillity of the setting lulled me to sleep.

Sometime later, in the midst of a dream that I was drowning, I awoke struggling for breath and tense with fear. For a moment, I thought that I was still flailing helplessly in the lake. In desperate confusion, I stared at a line of tiny lights and felt that I had to swim away from them in order to reach safety. Then, reality came back, and I saw that the lights shined from cottages on the other side of the lake. I sighed in relief, thinking that I must have felt just as Ken Alban had the night

before. But, with his poor eyesight, the lights would have been little more than luminous blurs.

Then, like a row of dominos toppling, the seemingly unrelated elements that had been troubling me suddenly formed a pattern. With a start, I realized that the writer's drowning had not been accidental — he'd been murdered, lured to his death by a jealous husband. Les Marston had killed Ken Alban as surely as if he had stuck a knife into his heart.

Sitting on the beach, I began to re-create in my mind what must have happened. The week before, Les had strung the Christmas lights for his wife's birthday party, and he'd left them up for a purpose. He knew that Ken Alban often waded into the lake late at night, and he knew also that the writer was nearly blind without his glasses. Yesterday afternoon, Les had secretly moved the raft to its new position. Later, he had pretended to leave for the city as usual, but he had snuck back and waited until he saw Ken Alban step into the lake for his late night dip.

Once the writer reached water up to his neck, Les had thrown the rocks which I'd noticed when I arrived that morning. Horrified, Alban had wheeled to avoid the missiles, madly turning in every direction at once. Finally, totally disoriented, the writer had realized that he must get back to shore. His weak eyes must have searched the darkness for a clue. The raft was to his right as it always was when he made his way toward the beach. Then, he spotted the bright blurs from the Christmas tree lights behind him and assumed that they were coming from the cottages on the other side of the lake. All he had to do was make his way in the opposite direction and he would be back to shallow water.

Alban had thrown himself away from the lights, kicking furiously, fighting to get as much distance as possible between himself and the glowing dots. Finally, choking for air, he had burst the surface of the water and allowed his legs to sink until he was suspended upright in the lake. But, to his horror, his feet did not touch bottom. There was no bottom. Panic gripped him and he floundered in desperation. Water filled his mouth and nostrils, then closed over his head with permanence.

As I reviewed the drowning in my imagination, Les Marston's guilt was unquestionable. Ken Alban had been having an affair with Sue since at least the summer before, and, once he discovered what was going on, Marston had decided on a course of murderous revenge. It occurred to me that, as a thriller writer, Alban would have appreciated the intricate method of his murder. I doubted that there would be any way in which Marston could be convicted of the crime, but the

longer I thought about it the more firmly convinced I became that the sheriff should be informed of my deductions. Maybe it was the rookie cop in me, but, as much as I liked Les Marston, I couldn't just let the whole thing pass, and perhaps the sheriff could come up with additional evidence.

I glanced at my watch: 8:32. There was an off chance that Sheriff Riley might still be at his office. As I trudged through the darkness toward my pickup, I regretted that the sheriff wasn't more likable than he had seemed to be that morning. I could easily picture him staring at me mockingly while I explained my ideas and then telling me to get the hell out of his office with my cock-and-bull story.

I climbed into the cab of my pickup, backed it around, and drove down the dirt road I had followed earlier in the day. In the pitch darkness, the scratching of the branches on the truck sounded forbidding, and I half-expected someone to burst from the forest and throw himself before the beams of my headlights. Only when I pulled out onto the two lane highway did I begin to gain control over my imagination. It was going to be a long time before I could ever reconcile myself to the reality of murder.

AFTER DRIVING FOR TEN MINUTES, THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE — a rectangular, yellow brick structure — was the first building I came across at the outskirts of town. I parked in the deserted lot and entered a tiny, stiflingly warm lobby. A sandy haired man sat behind a desk sipping coffee and working a crossword puzzle. He looked up at me without much interest.

"Is Sheriff Riley around?" I asked.

"Believe he's still in his office," the man answered in a flat voice. He picked up a phone, dialed a single digit, and waited a moment. "Guy out here to see you." He turned to me and asked, "What's your name?" I told him and he repeated it into the phone. Finally, he nodded his head toward a door marked SHERIFF and said, "Go on in."

As soon as I opened the door, I was met with a blast of frigid air. "For Christ's sake, Webster, close the door," Sheriff Riley snapped. "It took all afternoon to get the temperature comfortable in here." He was seated at his desk in the cluttered office. "Now, what brings you over here?"

"I'm not really sure," I began in a hesitant voice, "But I don't think that Ken Alban's drowning was accidental."

His lower lip curled out, then back in, and he said, "I've got the coroner's report right here. There was no sign of any foul play. No

bruises or contusions or anything like that. The damn fool should've stayed out of the lake if he couldn't swim."

"If my guess is right, there wouldn't be any telltale marks on his body."

"Well, let me have your story," he said wearily.

Without an invitation, I sat down on a wooden chair across from the sheriff and slowly explained my suspicions. As I spoke, the logic of my conclusions seemed more and more dubious, and, by the time I finished, I was beginning to wish that I'd kept my asinine deductions to myself.

But Sheriff Riley's reaction surprised me. Lighting a cigarette, he said, "You've got quite a batch of circumstantial evidence there, Webster. But you also make a kind of screwed-up sense. One thing's for sure — Alban wasn't the first of Sue Marston's playmates. It's common knowledge hereabouts that she gets lonesome while hubby's at work in the city. Marston's an easy-going sort of guy, but finding out that your wife has the morals of a sewer rat could push any man to murder." He spoke in an even voice, but emotion quivered just beneath the surface.

"Do you think there's any way to prove that he purposely tricked Alban into drowning?" I asked.

Again the lower lip appeared like a fat, glistening worm. "Well, to begin with, I'd like to check out the logistics of your theory firsthand. I've got a boat docked on the far side of Lake Mitchell across from the Marston's place. Why don't you follow me over there, and we'll take a ride on the lake and check it out."

"Okay," I agreed, feeling very much like a cop and pleased that Sheriff Riley was taking me seriously.

The sheriff reached around and switched off the air conditioner. "Let's go," he said. He crossed the office and yanked open the door. "I'm leaving for the night, Al," he said to the deputy at the front desk. "Webster here wants to know where the fishing's good. Central drop off is about the best spot for bass, wouldn't you say?"

"Finest fishing spot in all Lake Mitchell," Al said enthusiastically.

When we were outside, Sheriff Riley said, "No sense letting everybody in on your suspicions until we know if they're provable or not. I'd hate to end up eating crow over this. Just follow by blue-and-white around the lake until we get to my boat."

I nodded and climbed into the pickup. Sheriff Riley sped along the winding highway at close to seventy miles an hour, and the pickup rattled and swayed like a cement mixer to keep up. We'd been driving for about eight minutes when he suddenly slowed the police car and cut

a squealing turn down a pair of ruts leading into the forest.

THE ROAD WAS SIMILAR TO THE ONE LEADING TO THE Marston's cottages, only narrower and more treacherous. It ended in a small clearing a few yards from the lake. Once the headlights were off, total blackness enveloped us. There were no cottages or lights in the area. The warm air carried the shrill calls of thousands of hidden night creatures.

"You might as well leave your keys in the ignition," said Sheriff Riley. "No one ever comes around here. Then head on over this way."

I left my keys and followed his voice toward the lake. The boat was an eight footer with a small outboard motor. Sheriff Riley held it steady while I climbed in, then stepped in himself and tugged at the starter rope. The motor sputtered to life and slowly carried us out onto the lake.

Lake Mitchell lay smooth and placid in the darkness, and there were no other boats in sight. Several dots of light glowed from the opposite shore. They looked cheerful and beckoning, a source of shelter and comfort. But I knew that they could be deceptively treacherous as well. I squinted toward shore in an attempt to identify the Marstons' house, but the pinpricks of light were indistinguishable from each other.

Sheriff Riley headed his boat straight out toward the middle of the lake. Glancing at him in the moonlight, I noticed his lower lip curling in and out with a grim intensity. His eyes were black sockets in his broad, blunt-featured face.

Neither of us spoke as the boat skimmed over the water, but Sheriff Riley's breath came in harsh, audible gasps. Abruptly, he looked over at me. "We're about halfway across the lake now," he announced brusquely. "Grab those binoculars on the seat there, and see if you can spot the Marston place."

He slowed the boat as I fumbled the binoculars from their case. I stood up, bracing my knees against a wooden seat, and focused on the lights across the lake. While carefully scanning the coast, I located what I believed to be the Marstons' house.

"I think I've got it," I muttered.

AT THAT INSTANT, THE MOTOR SNARLED ANGRILY, AND THE boat swung sharply to the left. Struggling to hang onto the binoculars, I lurched to one side. A sudden pressure against my back shoved me completely off balance, and I splashed headlong into Lake Mitchell. Sputtering wildly, I released the binoculars and floundered to the surface.

"Hold it right there, Webster," Sheriff Riley barked. I stared up at his bulk silhouetted against the sky. He was on his feet, holding an oar as if it were a harpoon and directing it toward me.

"I guess you figure you're a real smart city cop, don't you?" he growled ominously. "Well, you're not as bright as you think."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded, treading water. "Let me back into the boat."

"You're not coming back into the boat, Webster," he grinned. "You're going to be spending the night right there in the lake."

"What's gotten into you? I'm trying to help you catch a murderer, for God's sake."

Sheriff Riley laughed out loud. "Is that right?" he chuckled. "You know, you really did have the whole set-up figured out, except for one small detail. Les Marston didn't kill Alban."

"Then who did?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Me," Sheriff Riley replied proudly. There was a strange maniacal glint in his eyes, and I could tell that he was thoroughly enjoying this moment.

"I tricked the bastard into drowning himself with those Christmas tree lights Marston had strung up for Sue's party," he explained cheerfully. "I drove this very boat across the lake last night, broke into the empty cabin, and waited until I saw Alban go for his swim. Then I switched on the lights, rowed out a ways, and started flinging rocks at the fool until he didn't know right from left. It was a real pleasure watching that man drown."

I felt the adrenaline pumping furiously into my system. "W — Why would you want to kill Alban?" I stammered, stalling for time.

"That son of a bitch was horning in on Sue Marston," he spat out. "She used to welcome my visits until that fancy writer showed up last summer. Then, all of a sudden, I wasn't good enough for her. I guess I showed her though. She'll be begging me to come back to her now to keep her company while Les is away. And I just might oblige her."

I knew that one quick jab with the oar would send me to the bottom of the lake for good. Somehow, I had to keep Sheriff Riley talking until I could come up with some course of action. "Did you move the raft, too?" I asked.

"Marston did that all by himself without even knowing that he was doing me a big favor," he replied. "But Alban wouldn't have made it out of this lake alive even if the raft hadn't been moved. That was just an extra piece of luck."

The sheriff grinned down at me cruelly. "And you're not coming out of this lake alive either, city cop. You were just a little too clever for

your own good. I don't need anybody questioning whether or not Alban's death was accidental." He thrust the oar at my head, missing by inches.

"You won't get away with two murders," I protested. "Somebody's bound to catch on to you."

"Is that right?" the sheriff asked contemptuously. "Later tonight, I'll drive your pickup from the station back to the Marston's cottage and then take your boat out onto the lake. Folks will figure you hit your head and fell overboard. Late night fishing can be as dangerous as late night swimming if you don't know what you're doing." Sheriff Riley's laughter sounded cold and vicious.

"So long, Officer Webster," he chortled, thrusting the oar at me. I ducked my head and grabbed onto the oar, twisting it sharply. But the sheriff pulled it away before I could wrest it from his grasp.

Muttering an obscenity, he lunged with the oar again, and this time he connected. A powerful blow sent a wave of pain crashing through my head and blurred my vision. A second blow followed immediately afterward, but I had already sunk far enough beneath the surface so that the water softened its impact.

DAZED, I DRIFTED SLOWLY DOWNWARD INTO THE COOL lake, not really caring whether I ever rose to the surface again or not. My head rolled backward, and I saw the faint shadow of a boat foiled against the star-studded sky. Abruptly, reality returned, and a sense of self-preservation gripped me. I struggled feebly to swim upward.

My painful ascent seemed to last for hours. I kept my eyes fastened on the bottom of the boat, trying to ignore the searing pain that filled my lungs. My one, slender chance for survival hinged upon surfacing at exactly the right spot.

I broke from the water just to the left of the boat. Gasping in a huge breath, I clawed at its side and yanked downward. For a brief second, I saw Sheriff Riley's face twisted with sudden shock as he stood beside the motor. Then, as if in slow motion, he stumbled to the side. I rocked the boat again. Arms thrown wide, the sheriff toppled with a hoarse cry. He burst into the lake with a tremendous splash.

Before Sheriff Riley even surfaced, I reached into the boat and pulled out an oar. I was ready for him when his panic-stricken face appeared before me. I smashed the oar down on top of his head. He slumped forward, floating motionlessly.

Mustering the last of my strength, I pulled myself into the boat, then reached back and hauled the prostrate sheriff in beside me. He lay at my feet like a huge, sleeping baby. I quickly slipped the revolver from

his holster and I kept it aimed at him while I started the motor and headed toward the nearest light on shore.

I docked the boat in front of a cottage about a mile down and, using rope I found under one of the seats, securely tied the sheriff's hands behind him and then his feet. Finally, I joined the ropes binding his feet and hands. He was still out could when I left the boat. I made my way to the cottage, knocked, and asked the elderly man who answered if I could use his phone to call the state police. "There'd been an accident, I explained.

After a moment's hesitation, he said, "Sure. The phone's on the table over there. Help yourself."

When I hung up, I felt relieved. I'd given the state police the old man's address and was assured that a car would arrive shortly.

I thanked the old man and returned to the boat to keep an eye on Sheriff Riley, but, when I got there, he was gone. As a new wave of fear washed over me, I looked beneath the seats and searched the bushes along the shore. Then, I noticed the shadow beneath the surface of the lake, gently rocking back and forth like some grotesque giant crab. Sheriff Riley lay face down in water barely two feet deep, his hands and feet still bound at his back. Apparently, he had tried to escape by rolling out of the boat. The ropes prevented him from getting too far.

LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I PACKED MY BELONGINGS INTO the pickup and walked across the beach to the water's edge. The lake glistened in the fading sunlight and rippled peacefully as it had for centuries, oblivious to the human dramas enacted around it.

I'd spent most of the day answering questions and signing forms at the state police station, and I was exhausted. Les and Sue Marston had been there also. Sue looked puffy-faced and haggard, but Les appeared strong and very much in charge of the situation. His wife stayed close to his side.

When I turned to leave, the sparkling of the Christmas lights in the trees attracted my eye. Wondering who would eventually take them down, I walked back to my truck.



It was a wonderful book of instruction. It told the Old Man exactly how to deal with traitors in his mob!

A Matter of Perspective

by JAMES M. REASONER

I NUDGED JAKE IN THE RIBS AND SAID, "HERE HE COMES."

Steve Lennox was coming down the stairs of the little hotel, a beautiful Mexican girl behind him. At least she was beautiful until you got close enough to see her eyes. They were like windows into the Arctic... hard and frozen.

Kind of like the eyes I see looking back at me in the mirror sometimes.

I put down the newspaper I had been looking at and started to stand up. I hadn't been reading it, since it was from Mexico City and I don't read Spanish, but it was a time-honored way to appear inconspicuous while you were waiting in a hotel lobby.

Jake stood up, too. Lennox hadn't seen us yet. He was at the desk, saying something to the slick-haired clerk behind it. Mariachi music drifted in from somewhere as we walked toward his back, moving quietly as always.

Jake's eyes cut over at me in a questioning glance. We were equals, both of us respected in the business, and yet whenever we worked together, he always seemed to defer to me just slightly. I guess he had heard too many of those stories that get started somehow. Anyway, I had learned to live with it. I nodded back to him.

He stepped up to Lennox, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Hello, Steve."

LENNOX WASN'T DUMB. HE HAD TO HAVE KNOWN THAT someday somebody would tap him on the shoulder like that. He would have known that right from the start. And yet from the look on his face as he whirled around, I knew he hadn't expected it to be so soon. It had been less than seventy-two hours since he had left the Old Man's house.

His eyes widened as they flicked back and forth between us. The blood drained out of his face. He hadn't expected anyone to catch up to him so soon, and it looked like he hadn't expected Jake and I to be the ones doing the catching.

Lennox wasn't the only one looking surprised. The clerk and the girl were both staring at us. They knew from Lennox's reaction that something was very wrong. The clerk seemed to shrink, drawing back away from the counter like he didn't want to be too close to whatever happened. The girl just stood there, a little off to the side but not moving back any farther, curious but not particularly frightened.

Lennox was frightened, though. He said haltingly, "Hey . . . You guys . . . I didn't think —"

"That's the truth," I said. "You didn't think."

He swallowed. "I guess the Old Man is pretty mad."

Jake nodded. "You guessed right. You didn't think he'd just let you waltz off with a hundred grand, did you?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven thousand, to be exact," I added.

I could see Lennox looking around for some way out, but I knew he wouldn't find one. We were between him and the front door of the hotel, and it was a long way to the back exit. Too far. He wouldn't have made it ten steps, and he knew it.

There was no one in the lobby to help him, either, as if there was anybody in this sleepy little town who gave a damn about what happened to him. A few people were in the bar that opened off of the lobby, but all they cared about was their drinking. We wouldn't make enough noise to distract them, anyway.

"Let's go, Steve," I went on, keeping my voice quiet. I reached out to put a hand on his arm.

He jerked back, like I was a leper or something. It's a reaction you never quite get used to.

"I-I'll call the cops."

"They don't care," Jake told him, shaking his head slowly. "They wouldn't touch this, and you know it. Shoot, they'll be glad to get all of us out of their town. So don't cause any trouble, okay?"

Lennox looked at me, fear and desperation mingling in his eyes. "Listen, Barney, you don't have to do this. I — I'd be willing to split

what I've got with you guys . . . " He was only an inch away from babbling.

"Forget it," I said shortly. "Forty-five thousand is nice money, but it's not enough to make me turn on the Old Man."

"J-Jake? How about —"

"No way, kid. There's only one boss, and that's the Old Man. We do what he says."

Lennox was entering the clutching at straws stage. He grabbed the girl's arm and jabbered, "How about the girl? How about Maria? I mean, you can have her, fellas, if you just —"

The girl spun around, pulling out of his rough grasp. Her face contorted in anger and disgust, and I saw her arm start to come around. Either Jake or I could have stopped it, but we didn't see any need to.

Her open hand cracked against his face. The unexpectedness of the blow staggered him more than the force of it did. She actually spat in his face, called him a few things in Spanish, and finished it off with a "You filthy pig!" I thought he deserved every bit of it.

But then her hand dipped toward her thigh, under her short skirt, and I caught the flicker as the dim lobby lights reflected off of steel. Lennox probably deserved that, too, but I couldn't let it happen. I took a step, reached out, and plucked the little knife out of her fingers. She looked a little surprised.

"Sorry," I said. "We have to take him back with us, and he has to be in one piece."

Lennox thought he saw an opportunity, thought maybe the girl's action had distracted us. He ducked his head and slammed into Jake, trying to bowl him over and make it to the front door. Jake's fingers tangled in his coat, though, and jerked him back, and I drove a fist into the small of his back. Lennox cried out like a hurt animal and arched his back. Jake took hold of both of his arms and turned him around. I said, "It'll hurt for a little while, but you're not damaged, Steve. Now let's go, all right? Jake and I are tired."

He was gasping for breath, the pain making his face even whiter. I didn't think we'd have any more trouble with him. Jake started walking with him toward the door.

I was going to fall in behind them when the girl stopped me by saying, "Where are you taking him?" She didn't sound like she was overly concerned with his welfare. Just the opposite, in fact. She wanted the gory details.

"Back where he came from," I answered.

She smiled, not very pleasantly. "You are a bad man, I think.

"I can't stop you from thinking."

"I don't care. He is a bad man, too. I hope you hurt him very much before you kill him."

"I think you're in the wrong line of work," I said. "I could put in a good word for you if you'd like."

She was still smiling when I went out, and the poor clerk behind the counter still looked petrified. High priestess and acolyte, I thought, but they were going to miss the sacrifice this time.

Jake and Lennox were already in the rented car, settled into the back seat. I got in behind the wheel and said, "Left the driving to me, I see."

"Sorry about that," Jake said. "You handle these mountain roads better than I do, though."

I STARTED THE CAR AND PULLED OUT ONTO THE COBBLE-stone street. It was nearly midnight. I didn't look forward to the long drive back over the mountains in the dark, but the sooner we got back to the airport, the sooner we would get Lennox to the Old Man, and tha was what he wanted. He was the boss, there was no getting around that, but that didn't keep him from being impatient and demanding sometimes.

Nobody said anything for nearly an hour. Then, slowly and deliberately. Lennox declared, "I am so damn stupid."

I didn't say anything in reply because I was concentrating on my driving. The road was steep and winding and narrow, and the headlights on the rented car weren't the brightest ones in the world.

—
Jake said, "Yeah, you are."

"I really thought I could get away with it. I knew the Old Man wouldn't like it when I didn't show up where I was supposed to, but I didn't think he'd send his best boys after me. Not for less than a hundred and fifty grand. I thought I could fool whoever he sent and stay one jump ahead of them. I never figured on you guys."

"You crossed the Old Man. He doesn't like that; you know how he is. You're for him or against him, and he's got no mercy for anybody who's against him."

I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw that Lennox had dropped his head forward into his hands as Jake spoke. There was a time in my life when I might have felt sorry for him. I couldn't now, but at least I could still remember a time when I could have.

He lifted his head after a moment and said, "Barney, would . . .

would you stop the car for a minute?"

I thought maybe he was sick and needed to hang his head out for a minute, so I put the brakes on carefully. There were no other cars on the road at this time of night, so I didn't have to worry about blocking traffic.

When I had the car stopped, Lennox looked out into the darkness past Jake and asked, "What's out there?"

"About a five hundred foot drop," Jake said. Like me, he remembered the harrowing trip over the mountains the day before.

"Five hundred feet? That's a long way. How about letting me go take a look at it?"

I hadn't thought he was that scared. But I knew it wasn't just us that he was scared of. He was more frightened by what we were taking him back to. I didn't really blame him. I knew what the Old Man had planned, and I didn't like it, even for a traitor like Lennox.

So, for a second, I thought about letting him go take a look at the drop-off, but I knew even as I thought it that couldn't. I could no more cross the Old Man than I could flap my arms and fly.

Jake saw the tiny little shake of my head and said, "Sorry, Steve. We don't have the time."

I guess that was Lennox's last hope, because he didn't say a word the rest of the way.

WE GOT TO THE AIRPORT ABOUT FOUR IN THE MORNING, BUT that didn't matter. The Old Man's jet had waited for us, and it was ready to go. We got Lennox on board. He asked for a drink, which I made for him, and then asked, "What about the money?"

"What about it?" I said.

"You haven't even asked me for it."

"That's because you don't have it. We went through your room earlier while you were out, and you're not good enough to hide it where we couldn't find it. And you don't have it on you, because you're not wearing the money belt. So you must have sent it on to somebody else to hold for you. That's none of our business, Steve. The Old Man will ask you about it."

He shuddered and downed most of the drink. I fixed myself one while I was at it.

I didn't know the pilot's name, but he was good at his job. He got us home in a couple of hours. The sun was just coming up as we put Lennox in another rented car and headed for the Old Man's place.

Lennox never had gotten his color back, and he looked pretty ghastly in the dawn light. I sat in the back with him this time while Jake drove,

and he just sat there, staring down at his clasped hands, and every so often, his lips would move. I was glad I couldn't hear what he was saying.

THE OLD MAN'S PLACE SITS ON TOP OF ANOTHER MOUNTAIN, which I suppose is appropriate. The road leading up to it wound around and around, and it seemed like we would never get there. I looked off to the east. The sun was just over the horizon now.

The house is impressive, I guess, but I don't like going there. Never have and never will. Because I don't like the Old Man. There was nothing I could do about that, though.

We got Lennox out of the car and started to herd him into the house. He walked like a man who had something burning in his stomach.

There was one time in my life and one time only when I thought about switching sides. It had happened when the Old Man and I were alone together, and he was giving me some orders for a new job. I had suddenly realized how old and frail he was, how he had been around and on top for so many years, and how much had been done by people like me acting on his orders. I thought about how easy it would be to slip my gun out and put a bullet through his head before he could do anything to stop me. I wouldn't have done it out of hate, but rather out of a feeling that he had outlived his time. A dinosaur doesn't belong in the Twentieth Century, either. But when it came right down to it, I couldn't even reach for my gun. I could destroy this Old Man, sure, but then who would take his place, who would fill the void? I couldn't answer the question, so I didn't pull the trigger.

That's what I was thinking about as Jake and I took Steve Lennox into the house. And I still couldn't answer the question.

I had to give Lennox credit. Instead of getting more terrified as we went in, he gutted himself up somehow and managed to be standing straight when we walked into the big room on the second floor. The Old Man was in his chair at the far end. As always, the room was too hot. But then nights on the desert get cold.

The three of us came to a stop in front of him, and he looked at me. I said, "Here's Lennox, sir," even though I knew it was stupid. I knew the Old Man could see him standing right there.

The Old Man nodded. His voice was a dry whisper as he said, "Thank you, Barney. Thank you, Jake."

He should have been dead a long time ago, and he looked it. His hair and teeth were gone, and his skin had shrunk to fit tightly against his skull. He stayed alive, though, and it wasn't because of anything the doctors did. He stayed alive because he had never accepted the fact

that he would die someday.

And I wouldn't have bet money on when.

Lennox sniffed. I could see that his eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. Sounding stronger than I would have thought him capable of, he said, "I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have done it."

"That's right, Stephen," the Old Man said. "You shouldn't have. I trusted you. I even loved you. I love all of my people."

"I . . . I know that, sir."

"Eight years, eight years you carried money for me. You never betrayed me before. The why of it really doesn't matter, Stephen. But I would still like to know."

Lennox's face twisted with emotion. After a moment, he said, "Everything I did was for you. You controlled me . . . You control all of us! All of our actions, all of our thoughts even, they're all determined by what you want. I . . . I just wanted to do something for myself for a change, and not have to think before I did it about whether the Old Man would approve."

The Old Man sighed. "You make me truly sorry, Stephen. I've always taken care of you, met your every need . . . I just don't understand."

For a second, I thought Lennox was going to go for the Old Man, and I got ready to jump him if he did. But then he just gave kind of a shake and said, "You take care of us, all right. But you never ask us what we think about it! You just do it, and demand that we love you for it!"

There wasn't any point in this, and all of us knew it. The Old Man was what he was, and always had been. He said, "All right, Stephen. Tell me what you did with the money."

Lennox was staring at the thick carpet now. He muttered, "No, I won't do it. Why should I? You'll kill me anyway."

"That's true," the Old Man nodded. "But you'll tell me because I want to know."

Lennox's head snapped up, and I think for probably the first time in his life, he looked right into the Old Man's eyes. Any strength he had faded away then, in the face of the Old Man's inevitability. Death, taxes, and the Old Man's wrath.

I knew I'd probably crack when my time came, when I finally displeased him.

Lennox told him the name of the girl to whom he had entrusted the money. The Old Man glanced at Jake and I briefly, and I knew that we would have another job to do when this one was over.

As it nearly was. The Old Man said, "Thank you, Stephen. Take him down to the basement now. I'll be down in a moment."

LENNOX WAS STILL SHAKING AS WE TOOK HIM DOWN INTO the basement room and waited for the Old Man. About five minutes went by while we waited, and I'm sure they were the longest five minutes of Lennox's life.

He glanced around at the bare walls of the room and at the two bulky burlap bags on the floor, and I knew he wondered what was going to happen to him. He couldn't help but think about it, whether he wanted to or not. Then the Old Man came shuffling in, carrying that thick black book with its cracked leather binding, and said, "This is a solemn occasion."

Jake and I looked at each other. We knew what was coming.

"Do you see this book, Stephen?" the Old Man asked. "My mother made me read it when I was a child, and I didn't like it. Therefore I never read it again until I became an old man." He raised a finger as if he was making a point in a lecture. "But when I was a child, I thought as a child. Now I think as an old man who loves all of his many children, but who must also be firm with them. It is, I suppose, all a matter of perspective. I can see now what a wonderful book of instruction that this book can be to a stern, loving parent." He nodded to himself, full of righteousness and satisfaction. Then he nodded to us and said, "All right. Let us begin."

Jake and I each opened a bag. Lennox wanted to run, but there was no place to hide in this room. So he screamed instead.

I reached in the bag and handed the first stone to the Old Man. He took it with a smile.

Jake and I exchanged glances touched with resignation. I supposed it could have been worse.

There was a thud.

At least we had talked him out of the damn lions.

ALMOST A CONFESSION

Chapter 13
of the gun-flashing Chapter-Play

"THE SPIDER RETURNS"

with **WARREN HULL**

A COLUMBIA CHAPTER-PLAY

**"She's dead!" the woman sobbed. "Sheba's dead!"
Fred knew there was only one thing to do now: get
revenge!**

Vendetta

by JAY FOX

SHEBA SCRATCHED AT THE FRONT DOOR AS SHE ALWAYS DID when finished with her nightly rounds. Insistent and demanding. Her claws had raked the varnish and worn a small depression low on the left side of the Malcolm's front door.

"Fred, would you mind?" Emma was settled in her "snug-sack," a thing like a sleeping bag with sleeves. She refused to concede comfort to the energy crisis, and besides not being able to walk with her feet in a sack, she was absorbed watching "*The Dukes of Hazzard*" on TV.

"Would I mind what?" he asked absently. Fred had been reading, only glancing at the screen often enough to make sure that he missed no scene including Catherine Bach.

"Would you let the cat in, please? It's hard for me to get around without crawling out of this thing."

"Oh, sure," he said, not wanting to hear any more about how she suffered because of the need to keep the thermostat set low. He sprawled the latest from Don Pendleton on the table set beside his recliner. "*The Executioner*" was in the midst of destroying another Mafia enclave in his own inimitable way.

Fred straightened his tipped back chair, folding the footrest into the front with a thump. "Nine years," he grumbled on the way to the door. "For nine years I've been nothing but a doorman for that bloody cat."

"What, Fred?" His wife was chuckling, distracted by the sheriff's fumbling efforts to escape from a patrol car sinking nose-first into a swamp.

"I said, for nine years I've been nothing but a doorman for that —" He'd opened the door a crack by then. Sheba came stumbling in and Emma shrieked in alarm. The cat was bloody!

Her gold, white and tan claioco fur was matted at the neck and down one leg with blood dripping from a small wound. "Oh, Sheba!" Emma thrashed getting out of her sack, more comically pathetic than the sheriff on TV.

"She's just been in another scrap," Fred said calmly. "She'll get another abscess and we'll get another vet bill. Lord, when I think what that damn cat has cost us over the years —"

Sheba ignored him as she usually did and went toward Emma, unsteady and swaying, mewing in a weak voice — a wet, gurgling sound worse than Fred heard after her previous battles.

"Poor Sheba!" Emma lifted the cat into her arms and the sad mewing stopped. She petted her, avoiding the wound at the base of her neck. Then Emma cried, "Oh, my God!"

"She'll be all right."

"No!" The woman sobbed from deep inside. "She's dead. Sheba is dead!"

"What? Let me see." Fred lifted a paw wet with blood and let it drop. It fell limp as an old rag. Sheba's yellow eyes remained wide, vacant and staring. When Fred waved his hand and then snapped his fingers right in front of her face, the cat didn't show even a flicker of response.

The body laid still in her lap, no motion of breath. Emma was right. The cat was dead. "Damn!" Fred lifted her from his wife's arms and examined the wound.

Emma sobbed again and clasped her hands over her eyes, so stricken with sudden grief that she seemed not to notice the smear of blood that it brought to her cheek.

The wound in the side of Sheba's neck was small and less serious looking than many the battling old tabby had come home with. Emma cried, "I don't believe it!" and shook her head in despair. Tears flowed between the fingers splayed over her eyes.

She didn't want to look, but couldn't bear to turn away. Fred seemed to have found something. Hope, perhaps? He hurried out of the room. "Fred, where are you going?"

"To the kitchen. You just wait there, O.K.?" He could feel something hard inside the oozing little hole. It might have been a bone chip, but he doubted that. It was too perfect, too symmetrical — and it matched the size of the wound almost exactly, about a quarter of an inch in diameter.

Fred laid the cat gently on the plastic counter top in the kitchen, half hoping that Sheba would mew or move again. Despite his frequent complaints, he had a kind of grudging affection for the beast. And he'd not realized until that moment how deep it was. His eyes misted with tears while the cat remained deathly still.

HE TOOK A SMALL WIRE SKEWER FROM THE BACK OF THE top drawer, one of a set on a little card shaped like a turkey carcass that Emma used to lace poultry for roasting. He probed the wound and felt that small, rigid thing. It was loose in the flesh. He could wiggle it around some with the skewer.

Curious, he opened the second drawer — the Junk Drawer they called it — it held all the odds and ends that didn't belong somewhere else. Again in the back, Fred found what he was looking for . . . a pair of needle-nosed pliers.

Gritting his teeth, he worked the tapered jaws into the wound. He didn't like doing it, but he had to know what that thing was. He could feel the flesh strain, the wound was smaller than all but the very tip of the pliers, but Sheba was past caring about that.

“Fred, what are you doing?” Emma gasped in dismay. “*Fred?*”

“Ssshhh!” He almost had it. “There!” He wiggled and twisted it out — a lead pellet with a trailing skirt like a little parachute. “It's from an air gun, an .18 I'd say.” He dropped and rolled it around in his palm.

“Do — does that mean Sheba was shot?”

“It sure does.” Fred gave a forlorn little shrug and tossed the spent pellet into the trash can under the sink.

“Save that, the police will be able to match it with the gun.”

“Emma, even if they could, nobody will go to all that trouble because of a dead cat.”

“But it was Sheba . . . our pet.”

“I know, I know.” He hugged her and consoled her as best he could. But Fred also knew that with crime the way it was, no one in authority would care about the killing of a house cat, not even one that had been like part of the family for nine years.

“You get to bed, try to rest,” he said, leading her to the bedroom at the back of the house. Fred tried comforting her, but had trouble keeping back his own tears. He decided then it might be best if they both cried it out, but he couldn't just sit — not and leave her with Sheba's body to deal with in the morning.

Mournfully, Fred walked back to attend to the remains and clean up the mess . . . all he could do to ease her grief and his own. It helped

him to be doing something, anything. All his young life Fred had been taught that big boys don't cry. That night at age forty-seven he did. Alone with Sheba, he felt no shame . . . only the start of a smoldering rage.

HE TOOK A CLEAN WHITE DISH TOWEL FROM THE STACK
Emma kept neatly folded in the bottom drawer, an empty shoe box from the closet in the hall. Some part of his mind kept saying the ritual of a funeral for a dead cat was absurd, but you can't just send the body of one you've lived with for nine years out with the trash.

Fred got a shovel off the rack in the garage and dug a shoe box sized grave three feet deep between two junipers along the back fence. "Bye, Sheba — " He was still blinking back tears, thinking about how often and how stubbornly she scratched at the door, and how she yowled when one of them forgot and left the toilet lid down. Sheba considered that to be her water font. How could any grown man get so fond of a troublesome cat? That didn't matter now, Sheba was gone.

He was mounding displaced earth over the impromptu grave, patting it down with the shovel blade when Fred heard the hissing little "pfft" from the yard next door.

Alone in the darkness, his hackles bristled. Fred knew that sound. One of his cousins had an air gun when they were both kids. "Missed that one, God damn!" he heard his neighbor say.

Fred stayed hunched to keep his head below the level of the side fence. He padded across the grass and pressed his eye to a crack between two redwood boards. By aligning his head just right, Fred caught a narrowed view of Ron Franklin standing on his patio deck, straining to work the pump lever of a pellet gun.

"Ten, eleven, twelve," he said, grunting with each word. Ron gave the gun all it would take. He was a huge man, balding with a barrel chest, half of which appeared determined to slip under his belt. He thumbed a fresh pellet into the chamber, clicked the bolt shut, snapped on the safety and then walked back inside saying, "The next damn cat I see scratching in the flower beds — "

Fred remained frozen, hunched uncomfortably. Then by shifting three boards toward the back of the lot he could see Ron sitting inside the house, eyes glued to the sliding glass door, the pellet gun loaded and resting upright against the arm of the couch.

"The bastard!" Fred growled under his breath. "He murdered our cat, and he can hardly wait to kill another." He could see Ron laughing, jabbing a finger into the base of his bull neck, talking to his wife Stacy — obviously not about the cat he just missed. She laughed too,

he could hear her.

That posed a real problem for Fred. Not only were they neighbors, but Emma thought of Stacy as her best friend.

EMMA AWOKE SOBBING WHILE FRED WAS UNDRESSING FOR bed. "Who would do such an awful thing?" she asked him, not really expecting him to know.

"I can guess . . ." He didn't want to tell her outright what he'd seen. That would only be another shock she'd find hard to bear.

"Who?" she demanded. "Who would shoot a defenseless cat?"

"How about Ron Franklin?"

"Oh, no," she said flatly. "He'd never."

It was going to be harder than he thought. "You know he hates cats."

"I know he complains about them scratching in his flower beds, but — "

"He has that vicious dog," Fred went on. "And he told us he was training it to eat cats."

"He was joking about that. Besides, Ranger isn't so vicious — " Emma gave a wan smile. " — not since Sheba swiped his nose."

"I remember that. I also remember how furious it made Ron when his big dog got his snout bloodied by our cat."

"But he wouldn't *shoot* her."

Fred decided to say nothing more about it. Not now, perhaps not ever. Not if his plan worked.

AFTER WORK THE NEXT DAY, FRED DROVE OUT OF HIS WAY to find a sporting goods store on the far side of the city. He'd thought about it all during the night.

"I want to buy a crossbow," he told the clerk.

"Certainly, sir."

"And some hunting arrows."

"Er, for a crossbow they're called *bolts*."

"*Bolts*?"

"Yes, sir. They're much shorter than regular arrows, but just as deadly. And more accurate for most people. You can aim and fire this crossbow almost like a rifle."

More like a pellet gun, Fred was thinking. Neither one made much noise.

FRED WAITED THAT NIGHT UNTIL EMMA WAS SLEEPING soundly. It had been a terrible evening. She talked about nothing but

Sheba and didn't want to watch TV. They went out and put some flowers on the grave, but Fred still felt that wasn't enough.

He dressed in a pair of dark slacks and a black pull-over sweater and went to get the crossbow hidden under an old beach towel in the trunk of the car. Excitement made his heart race.

He'd fired the bow a few times in a wooded field south of town. The first time Fred missed the gnarled oak he'd picked for a target. The next time he sank a foot-long broadhead hunting arrow so deep in the wood that he couldn't wrench it free. After three more good shots Fred was satisfied that he could hit a dog.

Ranger was part shepherd and part wolf, Fred always suspected — a big, shaggy mutt with a sullen disposition and a penchant for chasing cats and crapping on other people's lawns. Ron let the dog run free all night and openly encouraged him to do both.

With all Ron's complaining about cats in his precious flower beds that seemed particularly odd. Ranger's droppings scorched the grass and his urine killed small shrubs more efficiently than Agent Orange defoliated Vietnam. But never again, Fred was saying to himself as he took his position on the front porch behind the shrubbery. The thoughtless bastard will learn a lesson tonight. And his damn dog too.

BUT THREE LONG NIGHTS PASSED BEFORE FRED GOT A CLEAR shot. The monotony of that lonely vigil helped calm his nerves. When he raised the crossbow to his shoulder, his hands were suprisingly steady.

Ranger came sniffing across the front lawn, all eighty-nine pounds of him. Ron liked to brag about the dog's size and the things it did to cats. Fred kept thinking about that as his finger tightened on the trigger.

The dog paused and raised its leg over one of the little shrubs Fred planted in the strip between his house and Ron's. He held his breath and squeezed off the shot.

The night was still, so quiet that the twang of the bowstring seemed like a cymbal crash. He winced at the noise, but the arrow . . . or bolt was already on its way.

It tore clear through the dog's neck just above the shoulder. Ranger yelped, more surprised than in pain. The razor-sharp tip must have severed an artery. Ranger made it halfway across Ron's lawn then toppled and fell on the walk like a bag of wet laundry.

Fred kept his eyes downcast. Though grimly satisfied, he didn't want to see Ranger's death throes. He recovered the bloody little shaft that had skittered into the grass of Ron's side lawn. That and the crossbow he locked back in the trunk of the car, then Fred went to bed . . .

but not to sleep.

HE WAS AN HOUR LATE LEAVING FOR WORK THE NEXT MORNING. Not surprisingly, Ron was late too. He was in front of the house hosing down the cement walk.

Ron's face was a grim knot of rage. He didn't even say hello. "Some bastard shot my dog last night," he began.

Fortunately for Fred, Ranger was no longer in sight. "Must have been the same nut that killed our cat with a pellet gun," he replied.

Ron's florid face paled. "It wasn't a pellet gun, something with a lot more power."

"You know exactly what an air gun will do, don't you?" Fred's narrowed eyes gleamed coldly. "Especially to a small animal, like let's say a cat?"

One look at his neighbor's icy little grin and Ron knew. Fred just waved and said, "Gotta go. I'm late already." And he had one more stop to make — to dump the crossbow and its bolts into the trash compactor back of a supermarket near the plant.

THE NEXT MORNING WHEN FRED WENT OUT TO GET THE paper, he found his driveway and garage door splattered with what must have been at least two gallons of blood-red paint.

Ron was standing in his yard next door as though he'd just come out to get his morning paper as well. "It's a terrible mess," he sympathized in mock dismay. "And it's going to be pure hell to clean up. I tried everything and couldn't get out the blood stains poor old Ranger left on our walk."

Fred could only gape and watch Ron walk back into his house. He called in sick at work that day, then he and Emma both worked trying to clean up the mess.

The door was no particular problem, that could be sanded and repainted once the gaudy red smears had dried. But the paint splattered on the concrete driveway stubbornly resisted heavy scrubbing, first with paint-remover and then with every caustic they could think to try.

Ron left for work at his usual time, speeding off in his sporty little import hatchback. He was laughing before he reached the corner, Fred felt sure. But he would not be laughing for long. Fred was even more certain of that.

On one of his trips to the hardware store to buy caustics he also bought a package containing six highway flares. While Fred was gone, Emma and Stacy got together and called the police to report their

various misfortunes.

The young patrolman who responded an hour or so later was sympathetic, but admitted there was little the police could do. Fred, Emma and Stacy all professed to have no idea who might be responsible for the malicious mischief.

He regarded them all doubtfully for a moment and then shrugged. "Well, I'll file a report and ask the night watch commander to increase patrol of the area. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Fred looked even more doubtful, but he decided to wait a few days before striking again.

HE ENDED UP WAITING A WHOLE WEEK. THE POLICE DID actually increase their patrols for a few days. Black and white patrol units came through the neighborhood quite often after dark. Fred knew because he spent a lot of time watching through a thin slit between the drapes.

And after things had apparently returned to normal, he forced himself to wait another three days. It was late Friday night — actually early Saturday morning when he dressed again in his dark clothing and went to get the flares he'd kept hidden in the trunk of the car.

Wearing a pair of Emma's rubber gloves stretched tight over his larger hands, he bundled the flares together with the uncapped tip of one protruding slightly beyond the rest. He taped them together and slipped out the side door of the garage.

Ron's house was dark, it had been for hours, but Fred waited, watching from the shadows to make certain that Ron wasn't looking back.

Convinced at last, he hurried across the strips of side lawn and the planting area that separated their two driveways. Ron's sporty little hatchback was parked in the driveway as usual. He'd recently turned the garage into a woodshop and the Planning Commission had not yet approved the design of the carport he planned to put on in front of the house.

Fred felt as daring and determined as "*The Executioner*" himself. But not so fearless by any means. His gloved hand was trembling when he reached to open the driver's-side door.

The door latch clicked with a sound that rang like thunder in his ears. And one of the hinges squealed like a high-pitched scream. Fred stood frozen for a second, fearful the sounds might have been heard.

When nothing stirred, he struck the exposed tip of the protruding flare on the cement. It had a tip much like an oversized match. It sputtered and blazed, bathing his taut grin in red-orange light, plum-

ing acrid smoke that became a billow when the rest of the flares caught.

Fred threw the flaming bundle into the back of the car and eased the door gently closed, not enough to let the latch click. Greasy black smoke was pouring through the narrow slot before Fred reached the safety of his garage. More was burning than the bundle of flares. The whole car was going up.

HE PRETENDED TO BE SLEEPING SOUNDLY WHEN HE HEARD the first of Ron's angry shouts. But Emma leaped up at once and ran to their front window.

"Fred, wake up! Ron's car is on fire! It's awful, you've got to help them! Get a hose!"

"Hungh? What?" He yawned loudly, still feigning. But he smiled. Getting a hose was a good idea. A nice touch. Neighborly and all that. But Fred took his own sweet time putting on a robe and slippers.

Emma decided not to wait. She ran out and left the front door open, searching for the hose herself. It was still in front from their driveway cleaning efforts.

Fred had almost reached the door when he heard a shuddering *Thuuump!* The gas tank had exploded. Emma screamed, "Oh, my God! Fred, come quick. Ron . . . he's on fire!"

"What?" He was. Ron had been trying to battle the blaze with a tiny red dry chemical fire extinguisher — too little too late for that kind of fire. Now his robe was in flames. It was some glossy synthetic that blazed like a torch.

Ron made a frantic dash for the hose he had coiled in front of the house on the far side. Like Ranger, he only made it half way. He went down with a terrified cry, his entire body engulfed by the searing blaze.

Fred hurried then to get his hose, but by the time water splashed on Ron's scorched and tortured face, he knew it was too late. His eyes remained wide, vacant and sightless as Sheba's had been.

THREE HOURS PASSED BEFORE THE CORONER, THE POLICE and fire crews left. Emma spent the last hour trying to console her friend Stacy. Finally she persuaded her to call the doctor and he prescribed a sedative. Stacy was sleeping when Emma returned home, and Fred was waiting anxiously.

"How's Stacy?" he asked.

"As well as can be expected." Her voice had a brittle sharp edge. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"That Ron had a pellet gun, that he shot Sheba."

"I suspected."

"You knew, and you shot Ranger, didn't you?"

"Damn it, yes! I did, and I'm not sorry. That just evened things up. It should have ended there."

"But then Ron threw that paint, and last night you set fire to his car. Now Ron's dead." Her voice and expression were both bleak.

"That was an accident. If the damn fool hadn't got so close with that puny extinguisher — "

"There's going to be more trouble," she warned him sternly.

"From the police? I don't think so. They might suspect, but they can't prove a thing."

"I think you should go to them and confess," she said with some difficulty.

"What good will that do? It won't bring Ron back. It's over, Emma. It's all over."

"No it's not. Stacy told me that Ron has three brothers. They're all coming to the funeral, and she says they'll stay until justice is done . . . one way or the other."

He gave a moan and slumped forward, burying his face in his hands.

"Fred, I think — Fred, are you listening to me? Fred?"



The punk had escaped from prison where he had been serving a lifetime rap, so what did he have to lose? He held the revolver to the man's head and pulled the trigger!

The Featherston Whisperer

by WADE MOSBY

FEATHERSTON POTTS, ACCOUNTANT BY DAY AND INVENTOR by night, yearned for a bigger slice of the American pie. Every night after dinner, without fail, he thanked Mrs. Potts for her culinary efforts, and retired to his basement workshop.

And Mrs. Potts would rub her hands on her apron, sigh, and say to herself, "You're welcome, Featherston, and I do hope that this time you'll invent something that works — and sells."

It wasn't much to hold on to, but it was something, and Sylvia Potts believed that everyone should have a dream, even an impossible one. Featherston (early in their marriage, she had tried calling him "Potty" and "Potsy" but decided that neither was endearing) was a capable accountant, a man with a diligent and questing mind.

But basically, Potts hated his work, couldn't stand his boss and could hardly wait until his retirement. Being logical as well as diligent (not to mention having 20 years to go before he was eligible for retirement), Potts allowed himself to find solace in his dreams of recognition and wealth.

To be sure, not all of his great ideas had panned out. His simplified, oscillating lawn sprinkler, for example, had a tendency to part from the hose and skitter about the yard like some berserk rocket.

And Potts still wasn't sure what had gone awry with his pop-up

breadbox that was supposed to dispense one slice at a time but, instead, showered the kitchen with crumbs.

Others had worked out perfectly. His stainless steel, lifetime windshield wiper, intended to remove frost, rain or ice at a flick of a switch, did all that he had expected — and then some. It had a tendency to peel the windshield after it finished its intended chore.

BUT OW, IN THE SUMMER OF HIS 45th YEAR, POTTS FELT THAT he was on to something big. He had designed a small, lightweight silencer for a handgun. Silencers he had seen on TV and in movies, he felt, were unnecessarily bulky, often doubling the lengths of guns to which they were attached.

His silencer could easily be attached to any caliber gun, and in basement tests with his old Smith & Wesson loaded with blanks, it made scarcely more noise than a baby's sneeze.

Potts was excited about his newest brainchild, although he had yet to field test it with live ammunition. He had even considered names for it. "Pott's Shot" came to mind, but it was too easy and wasn't quite right. Maybe something like "The Whisperer" would do.

But all of that could wait until after the patent had been granted. Potts decided that he would be content to just take in royalties and let others take care of promotion and sales.

And so it was that one night after dinner, instead of disappearing into his basement, he broke the good tidings to Mrs. Potts. This time, there was no doubt, except in the wary mind of his wife.

"You're quite sure about all of this, Featherston?" she asked. "It's not going to chase cats around the yard or spray shredded bread, is it?"

"I'm sure as shootin'," Potts said, pleased with his little pun. "I want to test it tonight. We'll go out to the quarry and fire a few rounds into the gravel piles. Don't want our little secret out of the bag just yet, you know."

"We? You mean you want me to come with you out there in the dark while you shoot at rocks?"

"We — you and I — have waited for this for a long time," Potts said. "I want you to share this moment of triumph with me. It's *our* success, not just *mine*."

Touched by her husband's unexpected show of sentiment, Sylvia Potts smiled and said she'd be right with him as soon as she found a sweater.

Sylvia had rarely seen Featherston so elated. He actually hummed a little tune as they drove to the quarry just beyond the city limits. She

was happy for him. Maybe this time Featherston was on target, so to speak.

"It's about time I had a little bit of luck," Potts said as he turned into the quarry road. "This time, I just feel it — this is the big one, Sylvia. No more ledgers, no more credits and debits, no more calculators. We're going to be rich!"

Sylvia chuckled appreciatively and patted his arm.

"You've worked hard," she said. "You deserve a little bit of luck."

POTTS CAREFULLY STEERED HIS EIGHT YEAR OLD SEDAN TO the edge of the gravel pit and pulled to a stop. The moon was full, and he wouldn't need any light — just a couple of bottles to aim at. He had thoughtfully brought them with him.

Sylvia watched intently as he slipped .38s into the cylinder of his gun. She marveled at the compactness of the weapon. Featherston's silencer was a mere bulge at the end of the barrel.

Potts placed a bottle some 20 feet from the car and then returned to Sylvia's side.

"I'm not sure that I can hit it," he said, "but we're here to test 'The Whisperer,' not to win a marksmanship badge."

He took careful aim, using both hands, and squeezed the trigger. There was a dull click! The bottle remained standing.

"Marvelous!" Sylvia said. "I could barely hear the shot, but you missed the bottle."

"It didn't fire," Potts said. "Must be a bad shell. I've had this batch for years. Well, I'll give it another try."

Before he could lift the weapon, another car drove up and parked behind his. The driver turned off his lights. Potts and Sylvia stood quietly in the moonlight.

"This is supposed to be a secret test," Potts whispered. "I might as well have sold tickets."

"You do have the awfulest luck, Featherston," Sylvia whispered back. "Maybe we should just . . . go home."

A man approached from the other car.

"Whataya doin', Pops?" he asked. "Ain't you a little old to be out here neckin'?"

The voice was derisive, the tone insolent. It was the same tone Potts' boss used. Potts felt a prickle of fear, but he also felt anger rising within him.

"We were not necking!" Sylvia said with indignation. "We were testing . . ."

" . . . the effect of the moon on marigolds," Potts finished, trying to

keep his secret weapon behind him. "What are you doing out so late?"

"Got some spirit in you, eh, Pops?" the man said. He sauntered to within a few feet of them and looked them up and down as if they were specimens in a bottle.

"If you must know, Pops, I'm Goldilocks and I'm on my way to Grandmother's house. Ain't that so, Granny?"

-- He shoved an elbow into Sylvia's ribs, causing her to cry out.

"You can just call me Goldie," the man said.

Potts brought the gun into the open and stood with his legs apart, holding the weapon with both hands in the fashion of TV lawmen.

"Turn around, Goldie, get in your car and get out of here," Potts said.

"Or what, Pops?" the man inquired.

"Or I'll, I'll . . . blow you away!"

"Got some spunk in you, ain't you, Pops?" Goldie said. "All right, I'm going . . . just take it easy with that heater. Y'sure it's loaded? It's dangerous to play with guns, y'know."

"It's loaded and I'm ready," Potts said. "Just get going before I use it."

"Be careful, Featherston," Sylvia put in. "You might hurt him."

"What's that thing on the end of the barrel?" Goldie asked.

"It's a silencer," Potts said. "If I fire it, one way or the other you'll not hear the shot."

"You're makin' a believer out of me, Pops. You'd better give me that thing before you hurt yourself."

POTTS WAS AWARE OF A BLUR OF MOTION JUST BEFORE THE gun was snatched from his grasp. He looked at Sylvia apologetically.

"I can use this in my line of work," Goldie said, hefting the weapon.

"Could have used it for sure before I got out of Statesville."

"You were in Statesville?" Potts asked. "The prison?"

"Yeah. Had a lifetime pass but I didn't like the food. Well, I've got some travelin' to do, so if you two will kindly hand me your rings, watches and money, I'll be on my way."

"Better do as he says, Featherston," Sylvia sobbed. "Don't try to do anything brave."

"You heard the lady, Featherston," Goldie rasped. "Get goin'. I haven't got all night."

Sylvia emptied her pocketbook on the hood of the car.

"Now the rings, lady, and then it's your turn, Pops," Goldie said.

Sylvia slipped the diamond and the gold band from her finger and gave them to Goldie.

"You won't get away with this," Potts said.

"The billfold, Pops. And why won't I? I know you two will never mention a word, will you?"

As Potts handed over his billfold and his own wedding band, it occurred to him that his luck once again had turned against him. This was almost too ironical, to be gunned down with his own creation.

"That's it, eh, Pops?" Goldie said. "I'll check your car later. Now you two can go — just turn around and walk slowly down that road."

And be shot in the back, Potts thought. He decided that any action would be better than no action, and he broke into an awkward gallop, zigging and zagging.

"Very fancy, Pops," Goldie said. "But one more step and I plug the lady."

Potts walked back slowly. Goldie was grinning as he held the revolver straight at Potts' head.

"That's better, Pops!"

Goldie squeezed the trigger.

BLAM!

Potts stared incredulously as the writhing Goldie fell to the ground, clasping his mangled hands to his stomach.

Damn gun blew up, Potts concluded. Either the cartridges were the wrong size, or I didn't get the barrel aligned with the chamber.

"What rotten luck!" Sylvia said over Goldie's pleas for help.

Potts turned to her.

"What do you mean?"

"The damned silencer didn't work!"

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with
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A COLUMBIA CHAPTER PLAY



The judge's passion for justice went beyond talk. It was the code he lived by!

Let the Punishment Fit the Crime

by DOUGLAS HILLER

ALTHOUGH HE SELDOM OFFICIATED OVER CRIMINAL CASES, Judge Joel Hanson always said, "Let the punishment fit the crime." It was his way of letting the world know (that part of the world within hearing distance, at least) that he tried to be fair and just in all his decisions.

Judge Hanson's Passion for justice went beyond talk. It was the code he lived by. A big man, well over six feet tall and weighing 220 pounds, the judge presented the solid appearance of the football player he once had been. He also appeared to be good humored and introspective, which was also true. Quick to make a joke, he was just as quick to apologize if it cut too deeply and hurt someone's feelings. Judge Hanson got no pleasure from hurting people, though he didn't let that stop him from meting out justice when it was called for.

Before making a decision or passing a sentence, the judge usually had a long talk with the defendant. He wanted to be sure each understood the seriousness of the situation and the necessity for whatever action Hanson had to take. As a result, the judge had more people swearing by him than at him, and he had far more friends than enemies. In fact, if he were asked to name an enemy, he would have been hard pressed to do so. That is what made the campaign of harassment as difficult to understand as it was unexpected.

HE GOT HIS FIRST INDICATION THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG when the mail arrived on Monday morning. Joe Wright, the judge's clerk, set the pile of letters and magazines in the IN box, commenting, "There seem to be a lot of magazines today."

The judge was standing n the doorway to his chambers. He glanced at the pile and was surprised at the number of magazines, too. To his knowledge, he subscribed to a few law reviews and a couple of news magazines; nothing more. But the bottom of the stack was made up of at least a dozen periodicals.

He walked over to the IN box and examined the pile. Only one of the magazines was familiar to him. The others were all new. Each was a sex-oriented girly magazine of a particularly trashy and objectionable type. They were certainly not anything he would buy or read. Their mere existance offended him.

He checked the mailing labels and found they were, indeed, addressed to him. No mistake there.

The following day's mail brought fourteen more magazines. Then an even two dozen arrived. The judge thought someone had an expensive sense of humor. On Thursday, ten more magazines arrived along with invoices calling for payment for some of the previous titles. Now it was clear the magazines had been ordered in the judge's name without prepayment. This wasn't costing the joker a penny.

The joker had spent a few seconds filling out each subscription card before sending it in. The amount of time needed to cancel each subscription and straighten out the problem was considerably greater — that and the judge's embarrassment was probably a source of amusement for the practical joker.

Some magazines had been subscribed to more than once. Before the judge stopped counting, there were over a hundred and forty subscriptions that had to be stopped. There was a lot of labor necessary to cancel them, but a method was found. Judge Hanson saw no humor in the joke. Neither did Joe Wright who had the job of writing all the cancellation requests.

THE MAGAZINE ARRIVALS HAD SLOWED AND THE JUDGE WAS just about to breathe a sigh of relief when the joker fired his second salvo. One Friday the judge returned home to a dark house. When he tried to turn on the lights he found the electricity had been turned off. He lit a candle, but that didn't keep him from cursing the darkness. He soon discovered that the telephone had been disconnected, and the gas and water had been shut off, too.

It was too late to get everything reconnected before Monday, so he had to get through the weekend without his phone or utilities. He also had to get along without the home delivery of his favorite newspaper.

On Monday morning he learned that someone had called the phone company, utilities, and newspaper in his name, canceling everything.

It had been that simple. The judge had always believed he was safe from petty harrassment. Now he realized how vulnerable he was.

Before the utilities had all been hooked up again, the first packages began to arrive. Again using a phone, the joker had ordered a seemingly endless stream of small appliances, portable television sets, and junk foods. He had only to request delivery of the fried chicken and pizzas, but he needed credit card numbers for the other things. The numbers he gave were the actual numbers on Judge Hanson's credit cards.

On the following Thursday evening after court, the judge's car wasn't where he had left it in the courthouse parking lot. He suspected the joker, of course, but car theft didn't fit the pattern already established. He reported the car as stolen and waited for it to be recovered.

Four days later he received a call from Pete's Paint Shop, informing him that his car was ready for him to pick up. The judge swore silently. It was beginning to sound like the joker again.

He took a cab to Pete's Paint Shop and didn't have to look very far for his car. It was parked directly in front of the building. Instead of its conservative, dark-blue paint, it was now a blazing, fire-engine red. The judge had to turn away; it hurt his eyes to look at it.

There were any number of ways someone might have gotten his credit card numbers. A waiter in a restaurant or a clerk in a store might have been bribed to furnish them to the joker. Or he could have simply looked over the judge's shoulder in any of those places.

The keys the joker had furnished the paint shop when he told them where to pick up the car were another matter. They were the set the judge had kept in a magnetic box, hidden in the rightfront wheel well. The man had either made a very lucky guess in deciding that the judge would have spare keys hidden, or else The judge didn't like to think about that alternative.

JUDGE HANSON TOOK HIS PROBLEM TO LEO FISK, A DETECTIVE who had appeared in his court as a witness a number of times. Fisk, a slim man who spoke with self-confidence and authority, had made an excellent impression on both the jury and the judge. When Hanson finished talking, Fisk nodded his head, sympathetically. "Makes you feel damned helpless, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, it does," the judge admitted. He hadn't been sleeping well and was showing the strain.

"Well, it needn't," Fisk said. "This kind of creep always makes one mistake that'll give him away every time."

"What's that?" the judge wanted to know.

"He has to see the results of his actions. It isn't enough to send you magazines you don't want, order expensive items from stores, have your utilities turned off, and your car painted red. He has to see the havoc he has caused and, if possible your reaction to it. Keep your eyes open. You're bound to see a familiar face lurking in the background. When you do, odds are that'll be the guy."

"I've already been looking everywhere. I haven't seen anyone I recognized."

"In that case, there's a procedure we use in extortion and kidnap cases. It should apply here, too. I'll put a couple of men on it right away."

The next week was busy. Unwanted magazines were still arriving, stores were still sending unordered merchandise, and he found he was stuck with the red car. "Someone" had cancelled his auto insurance by phone.

ON FRIDAY, FISK WAS WAITING FOR HIM IN HIS CHAMBERS. Fisk handed him a typed list of names. "Are any of these familiar to you?"

Hanson read the list. "Yes! George Gower was the defendant in a case last year. He was swindling people using newspaper ads. I fined him and sentenced him to six months in the county jail."

"Bet his name wasn't in the ads. This kind of creep never does anything in the open. He always needs a company name or something else to hide behind. If he hadn't been able to be anonymous, he'd never have tried to get revenge on you."

"How do you know it's him?"

"Easy. I put men in front of your house on both sides of the street. They recorded the license number of every car that passed in either direction. The people on the list I gave you were the ones who didn't live in the area, but still passed your house several times a day."

"In that case, George Gower is probably the man, but how do we prove it?"

Fisk held his hands out, palms forward. "Whoa! I didn't say anything about *proving* it. All I said was we'd be able to identify the creep. Be happy with that, Judge. After I have a little talk with him, he'll be too scared to keep up the harrassment. Like I said, these creeps have to think no one knows who they are. Once they know they've been found out — something they thought was impossible — they quit."

"That isn't good enough for me," the judge said. "Making him quit isn't enough." He paused and chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. "So I don't want you to say anything to him. Now that I know who he

is, I'll think of something better."

"Okay," Fisk said. "Anything you say. Just don't do anything crazy. Right?"

Judge Hanson didn't reply. In recent weeks he had nearly forgotten how to smile, but now a faint smile was playing across his lips. And a plan was forming in his mind.

GEORGE GOWER CAME OUT OF HIS HOME, WHISHTLING A cheerful tune. His bald head was pink in the morning sun, and he wore a three-piece suit that was too tight for his stocky body. He descended the front steps two at a time, walking briskly. It was time to give the judge something new to drive him crazy. Gower was flipping a mental coin to decide whether to have the judge's house painted or have siding installed when he reached his car.

His sedan, like the others parked at the curb, had what looked like an advertising flyer stuck under one of its windshield wipers. He pulled it free and was about to drop it into the gutter. Then he noticed the couple standing on a porch a few doors away. They were holding one of the flyers and staring at Gower in a most intense way.

Gower unfolded the sheet and found that a photograph of himself occupied the top half of the page. He began to read:

The man in the picture is George Gower, a former mental patient with a history of child molestation and other sex crimes. The doctors claim he has been cured, but he has not. My son was one of his latest victims.

The police refuse to act on the word of a frightened and terrified nine-year-old. And I was threatened with a suit for slander if I told what I know about this fiend. But something had to be done. I can not allow this man to harm any of you, my friends and neighbors. Question your children. Show them his picture. He may have already approached them.

—A Concerned Neighbor—

By the time he reached the end, George Gower was shaking with impotent rage. Who could have written such a despicable thing? All thought of Judge Hanson had been pushed from his consciousness. A cold chill crept up his spine. What could he do? How could a man fight an anonymous accusation like that? His mind was racing, but it wasn't finding any answers.

Two blocks away, Judge Joel Hanson sat behind the wheel of his flame-red sedan with a pair of binoculars pressed to his eyes. Even at that distance it was clear that George Gower was badly shaken.

"Let the punishment fit the crime," the judge said, pounding the dashboard with an imaginary gavel. "Let the punishment fit the crime."

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Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL



One of the joys of book reviewing is picking up a work without undue expectations and finding a masterpiece. This was the case with *Outrage*, a new novel by Henry Decker. It is a courtroom drama filled with constant suspense, superb story telling, and a human drama that doesn't let go for a moment. The author, who is a member of the New York bar looks at a familiar situation: an obviously guilty criminal who has to be let go because of a technicality in the law. In this instance it is a rapist and murderer who takes the life of a promising young law student. He was out on parole for another serious felony, but because of that fact the judge had to let him go. The father of the victim openly buys a gun, shoots the man who violated and killed his daughter, and then turns himself in to the police. He makes a full confession. His motive: to show the world what is wrong with the law.

The impossible task of defending him is assigned to young, idealistic, and determined Benjamin Franklin Gordon. Perry Mason had a distinguished career defending innocent clients; in this case Gordon has a man whose guilt is beyond dispute and, because of his age, would never get out of prison alive. The resulting courtroom scenes are the best we have found in the literature since *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. This is a winner from the word go and not to be missed. (Morrow, \$13.95)



The annual anthology of the Mystery Writers of America is called *A Special Kind of Crime*. A distinguished mystery author always serves as editor: this time it is Lawrence Treat, who is credited with writing the first police procedural. Here are 16 stories by such top

writers as Stanley Ellin, John D. MacDonald, Ellery Queen, and Stanley Cohen among others. Our particular favorite is *Payoff on Double Zero* by Warner Law, one of this fine author's last contributions to the literature. This year the publisher is Doubleday in its Crime Club series. (\$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Anna Clarke, who is an experienced hand at the suspense novel business, offers her 15th book in *Desire to Kill*. This time she has hit on a really new idea, yet one that almost everyone can understand. An elderly woman enters a rest home for the aged operated by an engaging young couple who try hard to make the lives of their residents pleasant. The newcomer despite her age is a woman of demanding obsession: she expects everyone else to defer to her and to show her the same flattering attention as did her late husband. When the other residents fail to meet her demands, she begins to brood, then to hate. Driven by her ego, she fully rationalizes her killing of several of the people who don't meet her standards. The climax is chilling; the people in the book live in its pages. The murderess is clever, and so is Miss Clarke. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Author Laurie Mantell is a New Zealander who writes, quite naturally, about her own country. Her latest work *Murder and Chips* is laid at Nelson, a small city at the top of the South Island. Here an interesting murder comes to light when a body in fancy dress is discovered smothered in a pile of sawdust. A few days later another body turns up in a shopping mall, a death which may or may not be connected with the first crime. Before the police unravel the twin problems, there are some roots that reach into the past and involve Maori culture and the history of New Zealand's native people. Not a monumental work, but an enjoyable one that moves right along and is a good evening's entertainment. (Walker and Co., \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Oxford don Ambrose Usher returns for another go in *Murder in Paradise* by Jocelyn Davey, who is himself a former Oxford Don and a recipient of royal honors. Paradise in this case is the Caribbean island of Santanna. If it is indeed Paradise, St. Peter has been sleeping at the

gate, for the island is filled with such non-heavenly persons as a Trotskyist group, some highly suspicious members of the island's Chinese community, a Texas (where else) oil tycoon who has a private army of his own, a wealthy matron who wants everything her way, and at least one murderer. No sooner is Usher on the island than a bomb goes off in the car of the friend who invited him. There is plenty of additional action against an interesting background before Usher proves his detective skills once more. A change of pace mystery that will appeal particularly to those who enjoy good literate writing. (Walker and Co., \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

John D. MacDonald's fans, and they are legion, will be delighted to know that there is a new volume out that contains 13 of his earlier stories that very much bear retelling. It is not always possible with such anthologies, but this time the author has been consulted. He not only made the final selections, he updated many of the individual entries to remove references that would be badly out of date or possibly unknown to much of his present day audience. There is an introduction by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. in his usual pithy style and a forward by MacDonald himself. The book is called *The Good Old Stuff*; reading it will convince almost anyone that Mr. MacDonald's work has been bottled in bond. (Harper and Row, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT continue to hold a center stage position in a variety of new occult novels. Here are some of them: *The Nestling* by Charles L. Grant (Pocket Books, \$3.50); *The Surrogate* by David Combs (Avon, \$2.50); *Bloodsisters* by John Russo (Pocket Books, \$2.95); *The Heirloom* by Thomas Luke (Pocket Books, \$2.75); *The Crib* by Harold Lee Friedman (Pocket Books, \$2.75) and *A Nice Place to Live* by Robert C. Sloan (Bantam, \$2.95). Some recent reprints worth noting are *Buried in the Past* by Elizabeth Lemarchand (Bantam, \$2.25); *Cause for Death* by the notably talented Margaret Yorke (Bantam, \$2.25); *Road to Gandolfo* by Robert Ludlum (Bantam, \$3.75) and *McGarr on the Cliffs of Mohar* by Bartholomew Gill, an Irish novel that has a green cover, as well it should. (Penguin, \$2.95) Definitely notable is the fine biography of Dorothy L. Sayers by James Brabazon, now offered in paperback by Avon at \$3.95. ●

MIKE'S MAIL

TAYLOR FAN

Re: Mike Taylor's "The Wraith And The Dove" in the Aug. '82 issue, I really enjoyed reading his style of prose just as I did with his "Death Of A Pulpster" in the Oct. '80 issue. I just loved the way he handled the short fiction in the pulp tradition. The characters (or some of them) were real those days. I was wondering if you can get Mr. Taylor to do a novelette next time around.

Gary Seiler
 18 Madison Avenue North
 Kitchener, Ontario
 N2H 2Z4 — Canada

Sure, there's one in this issue. How's that for service!

COMES THE DAWN

Have just finished the July 1982 issue of MSMM, my first in many years and probably my last. I only read it because I picked it up from the end table in my son's apartment where I'm visiting before leaving for Iceland next Monday.

Aside from multiple errors due to incompetent proofreading, my complaints are: (1) inconsistencies in plot (why does your Salad Lady cook the greens before putting them in a salad? Mariposa Foothills was probably named for the butterflies rather than the flowers Lt. Alley missed. Etc.) (2) The inane "Marvin's Letter Bomb" has no redeeming social value nor, I suspect, does its author.

However, the coup de grace that compels me to put pen to paper is the anonymous — obviously for good reason — article "Sunday Afternoon at the Movies." Of all the bumptious,

presumptuous, male chauvinist assumptions I've heard in 54 years, that one takes the cake! Poisoned, preferably. I'm glad I'm not his wife. I quote: "At least that's the way it was if you were a boy. If you were a girl I don't know what you did, but I'm sure it wasn't half as interesting. Etc." You ass! I was right there in the movie house experiencing the same emotions. Girls are not aliens, nor did they come into existence when you began to notice us. We were there all the time. In fact, your mother was one, poor soul!

Dawn E. Williams
2322 S. California Ave.
Duarte, CA 91010

Exhibiting a wisdom far beyond his tender years, the author of "The Salad Lady" informed me that he never replies to irate ladies who write in the margins of letters. The author of "Marvin's Letter Bomb" was not available for comment, but I am — and I think his story is one of the funniest farce/black humor pieces I've read. Mystery fans cannot exist by blood and gore alone.

As for the article, the anonymity was accidental. The piece was written by me, your humble editor, and instead of a byline I decided to use my initials, CEF, at the end of the article, as I have done in previously published editorial matter. The typesetter left off the initials, I suppose inadvertently (I never asked). It was about eleven o'clock at night and the magazine was scheduled to be shipped to the printer the next day, so I left it the way it was. I didn't think it was important enough to make a fuss over.

I guess I'll be forever naive, but it always amazes me that people will get irate at an imagined insult in an innocuous sentence such as the one quoted. The whole article was intended as a gosh-wow remembrance of a nine-year-old boy sitting in a darkened theater enthralled by the magic images on the silver screen. Trying to turn a reminiscence of the Good Old Days into an attack on women seems to me like a futile endeavor and a waste of energy better spent on more rewarding pursuits. When I was nine, I didn't know what girls were doing. (Sometimes I don't know what they're doing now!) Iceland, eh?

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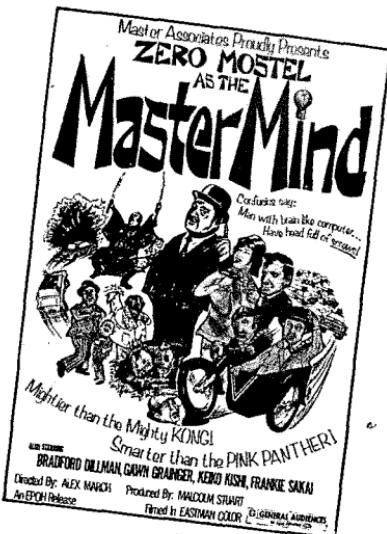
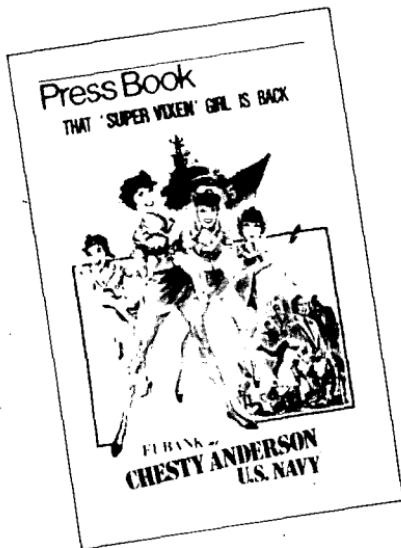
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